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cineACTION

**International
Cinema**

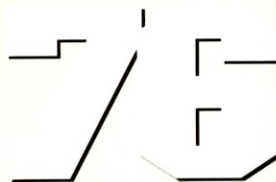
**Toronto Film
Festival**

**Underrated
Films**



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THE CANADIAN COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS
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INTERNATIONAL CINEMA

This issue was a group effort, edited by all the members of *CineAction's* editorial collective and covers several themes. The first section offers discussions of films from across world cinema.

Robin Wood, our contributing editor *emeritus*, analyses a film by French director, Patrice Chéreau. **Jeremy Maron** considers the theme of reconciliation in two films from and about Africa. **John McCullough** looks at the contradictory position of Toronto film workers in Global Hollywood. **Dan Jones** appraises the work of Kiarostami.

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2008

Each year we feature films premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival. This section includes all of our editors' reviews of films covering a broad range of national cinemas including Argentina, Belgium, Bulgaria, England, France, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

UNDERRATED FILMS

This section features articles on films from a wide range of styles and modes of filmmaking practice that are undervalued. The diversity indicates that many films have yet to receive their due. This raises questions of evaluation, re-evaluation and criticism, including the question as to why certain films are championed over others and, in some cases, without justification, considering the merits of the work.

Part of *CineAction's* mandate has been a commitment to discussing films that are underrated and/or neglected. For example, the TIFF section of this issue includes films that were ignored by the press during the festival yet deserve recognition. At present, most film magazines restrict their coverage to mainstream critical favourites while academic journals tend to concentrate on areas of specialization.

ON THE WEBSITE Visit our new website at cineaction.ca for information on subscriptions and back issues. The website also offers a selection of complete articles from past issues. In issue #75, there was an unfortunate omission of pertinent images that went along with Peter Harcourt's essay *Analogical Thinking: Organizational Strategies within the Works of Jean-Luc Godard*. It has been posted in full on our website with accompanying stills. We apologize to Peter for our oversight.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 77

AVENGERS ON FILM Comic Book Heroes and Villains. This theme looks at the rapidly escalating popularity and presence of films based on comic book superheroes. Investigations of form and analyses of content are both welcome.

THE DOCUMENTARY As a counterpoint to the first theme, the issue will also look at the escalating popularity of what could be seen as its antithesis, the documentary film.

Edited by Susan Morrison. Email: smorr@cineaction.ca

It would be appreciated if a brief proposal be submitted as early as possible as an indication of intention to submit. Please address all queries and submissions to the issue's editor. Submission in hard copy should be mailed to Susan Morrison, 314 Spadina Rd., Toronto, ON., Canada M5R 2V6.

Deadline: February 15, 2009.

ISSUE 78

GLOBAL CINEMA NOW? Global capitalism continues in turmoil and crisis. Contributions on the state of Global Hollywood, international co-productions, particular national developments, ongoing transformation of all the mass media, analysis of films or genres that reflect contemporary crisis.

CANADIAN FILMS AND TELEVISION Historical or critical analysis and reviews of Canadian films and television.

Edited by Scott Forsyth

Submissions in hard copy to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3.

Questions to sforsyth@yorku.ca

Deadline: May 1, 2009

The Skull Beneath the Skin

PATRICE CHÉREAU AND SON FRÈRE

ROBIN WOOD

The anxiety we carry within us, all our broken dreams, the inexplicable cruelty, the fear of death, the painful insight into our earthly condition, have worn out our hope of a divine salvation. The cries of our faith and doubt against the darkness and the silence are terrible proofs of our loneliness and fear. Do you think it's like that?

—Bibi Andersson reading from an (unidentified) book in Bergman's *Persona*.

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

—T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*



Chéreau directing
La reine Margot

Patrice Chéreau is perhaps the most uncompromising of all major contemporary filmmakers. Unless content to exist in a private and inaccessible world, every filmmaker (every artist) is compelled to develop ways of negotiating with the audience, finding the means of expressing what needs to be expressed so that it is not only comprehensible but to some extent palatable. At the lowest, most craven, money-grubbing and contemptible, extreme, we might place modern Hollywood, with its outpourings of teen sex comedies and increasingly repulsive gore-fests—up to, that is, the past year or so, when a few intelligent and even challenging films have begun to emerge, a development for which we should thank (if for nothing else) President Bush, who has at last (after many efforts) managed to make protest popular. But the challenge of such films is not sufficiently disturbing seriously to damage their reception at the box office. At a far further extreme are those filmmakers who are ready to risk outright rejection simply because they feel an irresistible need to confront their audiences with realities most of us prefer not to think about, among which apparently needless and meaningless suffering and death are perhaps the most prominent, basic and existential.

Because its leading character is (like Chéreau) gay, I chose *Son Frère* as one of the dozen films to screen for my class of twenty university students in a course on 'Queer Cinema' last summer. All twenty were there when the film began; when I turned on the lights at the end, only five remained. A pity, because it was a strong candidate for the best film on the course...but also, I think, a credit to Chéreau, who has made what is perhaps the finest, most intelligent, most uncompromising film about dying that I have ever seen. I have spent much of the past two weeks with it, and it is now among my favourite films. Dying, a topic most of us try hard to avoid, is also (along with being born) the one that most nearly concerns all of us. There are many films about death, but very few about dying. Death is something we all know about, because we all know it's going to happen to us somewhere, sometime. Yet it remains strangely abstract, as if it both concerns us and doesn't: we can toss it aside. Dying, and what it means, is something else.

A society coming apart at top and bottom, or passing over into another form, contains just as many possibilities for revelation as a society running along smoothly within its own rut. The individual is thrust out of the sheltered nest that society has provided. He can no longer hide his nakedness by the old disguises. He learns how much he has taken for granted was by its own nature neither eternal nor necessary but thoroughly temporal and contingent. He learns that the solitude of the self is an irreducible dimension of human life no matter how completely that self had seemed to be contained in its social milieu. In the end he sees each man as solitary and unsheltered before his own death.

—William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*

Chéreau's extraordinary film has taught me something towards confronting my own death: a beginning, at least. I am 75 years

old. As most of my elder siblings and both my parents lived well into their nineties, I am not too distressed by that fact. I can even laugh about it. But I think, if I were only 25 years old, it would be a good and intelligent step to contemplate this undeniable fact of our existence: our non-existence. Many reject any attempt to talk about dying as 'morbid', which is mere cowardice and self-defence. Very few want to confront death and talk about it. As Dylan Thomas said, 'Do not go gentle into that good night...'—though I'm not convinced that we should '...rage, rage, against the dying of the light....' Chéreau is too intelligent for mere useless rage.

Existentialism (in my limited understanding of it) involves the rejection of all the comforting ideas and beliefs that the human race has invented to give life a meaning it doesn't 'existentially' possess: notably religious beliefs, eternal life, a benevolent God, an immortal (but unidentifiable) 'soul', an elaborate system of rewards and punishments for our behaviour. Certainly, I abandoned all religious convictions many years ago, and I think our world would be a better and happier place if others did the same. Why do we so desperately need, following Lewis Carroll's White Queen, to believe six impossible things every day before breakfast? The rejection leaves us human individuals stranded and 'naked', hence with the necessity of constructing our own meaning. It also leaves us with personal responsibility: if no higher being is responsible for us, we must be responsible for ourselves, for our own choices and decisions, for our own contacts and relationships, with no promise of celestial rewards. This places enormous importance on death, no longer the gateway to eternal bliss but quite simply the extinction of meaning—of the meaning we have constructed for ourselves. But, except for those few who could be confident of eternal bliss, death has always been terrifying, though for vastly different reasons. When God was still alive, it was the terror of eternal damnation, the inability to die; under Existentialism it is the dread of nothingness, of mere extinction—unless, perhaps, you can be completely convinced that you have fulfilled your human potential and have nothing further to live for, which is probably rarer and even

more presumptuous than the confident assurance of 'salvation'. *Son Frère* seems to be one of the very few fictional films (Kurosawa's *Ikiru* is another) that is actually *about* dying, as opposed to using death as a necessary plot device or way of ending the story, or a means of punishment or self-sacrifice or saving one's soul. I have not been able to think of any others.

The film opens on an Existential landscape: a still shot of bare, drab, undistinguished and unattractive rocks by the sea with, in the far distance, a large house and a few hovels, with no signs of life. It appears to be summer. Nothing moves, nothing but tough lichen grows. The dialogue begins before we see who is speaking: an old man holding forth about shipwrecks to two younger men, one of whom looks very ill. We cannot know this at the time, but the shot is outside chronology: it belongs somewhere near the end of the film, before the sick man's suicide. There is the hint that he knows he is going to die soon, because he talks obsessively (in a tone that sounds half-serious, half-ironic) about 'ferries', evoking (given his evident condition) Charon, the ferryman of mythology, who rowed souls to the land of the dead.

The old man's talk of shipwreck establishes a motif that recurs in various manifestations: the unnamed, hence undefined. The old man knows the exact place locally where these shipwrecks happen, but he can't remember the name. In the first chronological sequence ('February'), in Luc's city apartment, Thomas (the dying brother) tells him that his disease has a name, but he never speaks it (doctors thought it might be leukemia or AIDS, but it is neither); in the hospital the woman doctor again assures us that it has a name, but she speaks only of the major symptom, the drop way below normal of 'platelets'. The film has the same reticence about work. Thomas is clearly too ill to work, but we never learn what his profession was; the father's is never identified; when Thomas asks Luc if he's still a teacher Luc doesn't answer, and this remains unestablished (though never denied). Although the characters live in a very real world, we are never given the sort of background information realism normally demands and audiences expect. We are to be concerned with deeper life issues to which such things are irrelevant. An existential inquiry into the significance of death has little interest in what you do for a living or what disease you die of.

Of far greater potential importance are relationships: how we relate to others, how we feel about them, and why: blood relatives and lovers. The parents of Thomas and Luc appear in the film relatively briefly and are of little consequence. The mother is helpless, largely passive, lost; the father blusters and falls back on good old 'common sense' and empty maxims. His most significant moment comes when he loses his always precarious control and demands to know why this has happened to Thomas rather than to Luc, which wouldn't have mattered. The parents never mention that Luc is gay, but we are surely meant to see this as the basis of the father's anger and parental preference. In the final scenes the father is absent and the mother sits in silent misery at a table in the background of the shots, never venturing to speak, silenced by what is beyond her grasp.

The central, and ultimately the only truly meaningful, rela-

tionship in the film is (as the title suggests) that between the brothers—which is not to belittle the crucial importance of their respective lovers, to which I shall return. Their first scene together (chronologically the earliest in the film) establishes at once what their relationship has been and how the shadow of possibly imminent death may change it—the change, very gradual, and meticulously mapped by Chéreau, will take up the rest of the film. Luc is clearly surprised by Thomas' visit, and his reluctant welcome is both hostile and defensive: it is clear that his brother has never visited him before. Thomas insists that Luc's apartment is *exactly* as he imagined it—mentioning, especially, the amount of books, but also noting the two indented pillows on the double bed, the implication of which is surely that, when he received Thomas' phone call announcing his totally unexpected visit, Luc had only just time to turn his unidentified partner out. Thomas' attitude to his brother's homosexuality isn't blatantly hostile: he simply feels the need to assert his (heterosexual) superiority. At the same time, it is clear that (a) he is terrified and (b) Luc is the only person to whom he could turn (he has told his parents he is undergoing 'tests', but no more). Luc is clearly reluctant to be dragged into this (it is already clear, and will become clearer, that he owes his brother nothing). But we also sense that this is a somewhat different brother—a brother who is out of control, desperate and terrified, a brother (we are led to realize) whom Luc has never really encountered before.

One of the most interesting aspects of this complex film is the role of the two lovers—Thomas' lover Claire, Luc's lover Vincent. Both disappear from the film long before the end (Claire apparently opts out because the ordeal is too much for her, Luc (ambiguously) decides to end his relationship with Vincent in order to give all his time to his brother), but both play decisive roles in the relationship between the brothers, Claire negatively, Vincent positively. Both reveal intelligence and insight far beyond anything the parents can offer. We don't know how long Claire and Thomas have been lovers or how their relationship has worked, but when we first see her (aside from her silent background presence in the scene of the first parents' visit) Vincent is clearly, pathetically, using her to bolster his confidence, reaching up from his hospital bed to pull down her dress, stroke her breasts, to her understandable embarrassment; we register her relief, and swift departure, when this is interrupted by Luc's arrival in the ward. Her final scene in the film, when Luc, understanding her pain—or more precisely her sense of her own inadequacy—holds her, kisses her, in an almost-erotic embrace, which she perfectly understands (both its genuineness and its transience), is among its most complex and beautiful moments.

Vincent's role in reuniting the brothers is even more complex. Clearly and touchingly concerned when Luc first tells him about Thomas, he has begun to visit him in hospital (without Luc's permission or even knowledge). Luc (who is some distance from being your totally accepting, open gay male—we see him, in the beach sequence with Thomas, telling a group of naked gay youths not to 'go all the way') has been embarrassed from the start by Thomas's presence, even denying, when he learns of Vincent's hospital visits, that he knows who Vincent is. Essentially, it is Vincent who explains Thomas to him ('I think he

thinks about it, that's why he's not afraid. He's brave... You need to think about the two of you. You two are sharing something important.'). Cut to Luc, foreground, sitting on the bed thinking this over, Vincent now asleep.

There follows the film's most remarkable and troubling scene. We are back in the hospital, Thomas (close-up) on a life support system, the camera moving down over his scarred and ruined body. Luc appears, in mask and hospital coat, and asks to watch. For the first time in the film background music creeps in: it's the introduction to the Marianne Faithful song *Sleep*, which we shall hear in full over the end titles¹ (Faithful had a supporting role in Chéreau's previous film *Intimacy*). Its purpose here is to alert us to a shift in reality-level. Chéreau cuts to a fast forward tracking-shot of Luc wandering through a house we have not seen before (presumably the parental home, by the sea). The haunting, enigmatic song continues over the ensuing scene ('It is safe to sleep alone/ In a place no one knows,/ And to seek life under stone/ In a place water flows./ It is best to find in sleep/ The missing pieces that you lost,/ Best that you refuse to weep./ Ash to ash, dust to dust'). There is a bed with a figure in it on life support, but the figure is fully dressed and we recognize it as Luc. The film cross-cuts between Luc watching and Luc on the bed. Thomas enters, tells Luc to join him, rushes out. Then Vincent is sitting beside the bed, in a dressing-gown, asking if Luc has unhooked his support system again ('I can't help you if you do that'). Then we are back in the hospital room and reality, and the song stops. Thomas wakes up, tells Luc that he had a dream in which he ate his hat. Luc hesitates, manages a smile, asks if it tasted good. The movement into fantasy/hallucination is the film's pivotal moment, the ultimate breakdown of barriers between the brothers, the sharing of the reality of death—which leads directly, though with a somewhat brutal abruptness, to Luc's decision to break with Vincent in order to devote all his time to Thomas. However, as he tells Thomas this he qualifies it immediately with 'Maybe... I don't know...'.

Yet (the film suggests, both structurally and in terms of direct impact) there has already been a decisive moment in Luc's education in existential reality: his encounter with the nineteen-year-old boy (he seems scarcely an adult) as he wanders around the hospital waiting for further news of his brother. The scene occurs at roughly the film's midpoint, and the character in question never appears before or after and has no relation to the film's main narrative—all of which sets it apart, a privileged moment, a disturbance within an always disturbing film, not quite assimilable into the linear development. The boy, awkwardly carrying his IV stand around with him, stops as they make eye contact. He wants to talk. He is naked under his gown; the whole encounter has muted sexual overtones. The boy talks. His sickness is unnamed (like Thomas's), he has been cut open, they are going to cut him open again, he shows Luc the incision from his chest to his navel, he doesn't want to be cut open any more. Luc, watching him struggle away with his apparatus, feels compelled to reach out, touch him, try to embrace him... an extraordinary moment where the erotic and the caring reach fusion, an effect repeated near the end in Luc's last scene with Thomas before the latter's suicide. But the boy turns away,

beyond touch. In a desolate film, this is the most desolate moment, the moment where the existential questions (Why are we born, why do we live, what do we live *for*?) are most clearly confronted, and significantly left unanswered. The film's ending balances this but doesn't by any means annihilate it.

The final scenes

The crux of the final sequences is of course Thomas's suicide. It is preceded by a series of three scenes describing the brothers' increasing closeness and affection—scenes perhaps made possible by the father's unexplained absence:

1. In the home, Luc suggests a swim together. In the event Thomas sits on the beach and watches. Luc, emerging from the water, tells him it's as well he didn't swim because of the strong undertow. It seems logical to associate this with the film's opening scene, with the old man, which establishes that there is a particular place where shipwrecks happen and bodies are not recovered. It is also the place that Thomas will choose for his suicide, as if Luc had somehow suggested this. There is, however, no sense of blame: rather, as the suicide is a matter of rational choice (an *existential* suicide), Thomas is acknowledging his brother by choosing the place.
2. Such a reading is confirmed by the second scene, which follows at once. The brothers are on the beach, clothed; Thomas tells Luc that he loves him; Luc, initially surprised, reciprocates.
3. Back in a bed in the hospital, Thomas takes Luc's hand and Luc pulls down his brother's gown to caress and stroke his skin—the effect is at once erotic and asexual, the physical contact confirming the previous scene's spoken affection.

This is followed immediately (in screen time—days at least have passed and Thomas has returned to the house) by Thomas's suicide, at dusk or perhaps dawn (the light is dim), walking into the sea naked and alone. Cut to Luc, early morning, searching the house for his brother then sitting at a table drinking coffee. When he eventually alerts the police the officer in charge wonders why he waited so long, but this has been explained for us in a brief flashback to the hospital establishing Thomas's decision, in Luc's presence, to stop all medication: he has decided to be allowed to *choose* his death. Delaying the inevitable call, Luc waits at home, receiving two phone calls, from the mother and from Claire: he tells her that Thomas is not up yet.

The final, very brief, scene has Luc alone, silent, meditating. What has been gained? Understanding? Acceptance? Uncertainty? We don't know. Can an ending be both bleak and oddly affirmative simultaneously?

CineAction thanks Film International for granting permission to reprint this article. It appeared originally in Film International Issue 21, Volume 4 Number 3, 2006.

Notes

1. Chéreau's sensitivity to music prevents him from using it merely to 'tell us how to respond', in the lazy manner of most mainstream films. When he *does* use it (for example, the Adagio of Mahler's 10th symphony at the end of *Ceux qui m'aiment prendront le train*) it is fully earned. We might recall that he was responsible for a remarkable, predictably controversial, production of Wagner's *'Ring'* cycle at Bayreuth, with Boulez as conductor.

National Reconciliation and its Performative Limitations

JOHN BOORMAN'S *IN MY COUNTRY*
AND FANTA RÉGINA NACRO'S *NIGHT OF TRUTH*

JEREMY MARON

Introduction:

Reconciliation—A Very Different Final Solution

After living under an apartheid government since 1948, on May 10, 1994, South Africa witnessed the presidential inauguration of political prisoner and human rights activist Nelson Mandela, officially ending an era characterized by racially-motivated atrocities and human rights abuses.¹ As a means of beginning to contend with the weight of the nation's violent past, and looking forward to a future in which citizens, formerly divided as black

and white, victims and perpetrators, would be united, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in July 1995 when President Mandela signed into law the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act.² Presided over by Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC and its ambitions were strongly informed by Christian notions of reconciliation, confession, guilt and forgiveness. Given the prominent role that theological discourse has traditionally played in the nation's political mat-

extensively with these issues of reconciliation and forgiveness in South Africa in the late- and post-apartheid period. Produced by the Christian production agency Messenger Films, the title *Final Solution* invokes the National Socialist plan to engage in systematic genocide as the "Final Solution to the European Jewish Question."³ Krusen's film initially conforms to the genocidal implications of its title, applying it to the intentions of Gerrit Wolfaardt (Jan Ellis), an Afrikaner white supremacist in South Africa at the end of the apartheid period, whose "solution" to the growing racial tensions between the white minority and black majority is the systematic extermination of the latter. However, *Final Solution* goes further than simply extracting the "Final Solution" from its spatiality and temporality in mid-20th century Europe. The film ultimately inverts the murderous intent of the "Final Solution" after Wolfaardt meets his future wife, Celeste (Liesel van der Merwe) and the Rev. Peter Lekota (John Kani), through whom he abandons his hate-filled intentions. After this "conversion" of sorts, Wolfaardt becomes a staunch advocate of racial reconciliation as a "final solution" that fully conforms to the goals set forth by the TRC. While this about-face attracts seething anger from Moses Moremi (Mpho Lovinga), a black man that Wolfaardt had previously beaten nearly to death during a violent raid, the optimism adopted by *Final Solution* towards the possibility of transformation from genocidal hatred to compassionate reconciliation is manifest in the protagonist's ability to overcome his hatred, and is alluded to in the film's tagline, "Hate was the Problem...Forgiveness was the answer."

However, as Richard A. Wilson notes, the version of restorative justice that was repeatedly invoked by national political figures and the TRC was at dissonant odds with widespread popular understandings of retribution and punishment as appropriate judicial responses to apartheid.⁶ As such, it is clear that the TRC's mandate of reconciliation through forgiveness, optimistically advocated in *Final Solution*, was far from wholeheartedly accepted by the South African population at large. Such dissonance suggests practical limitations to a theoretically utopian ideal that seeks the unification of a heterogeneous population that invariably comprises countless conflicting opinions regarding the goals of the TRC and its understanding of what South Africa should "be" (reconciled and unified).

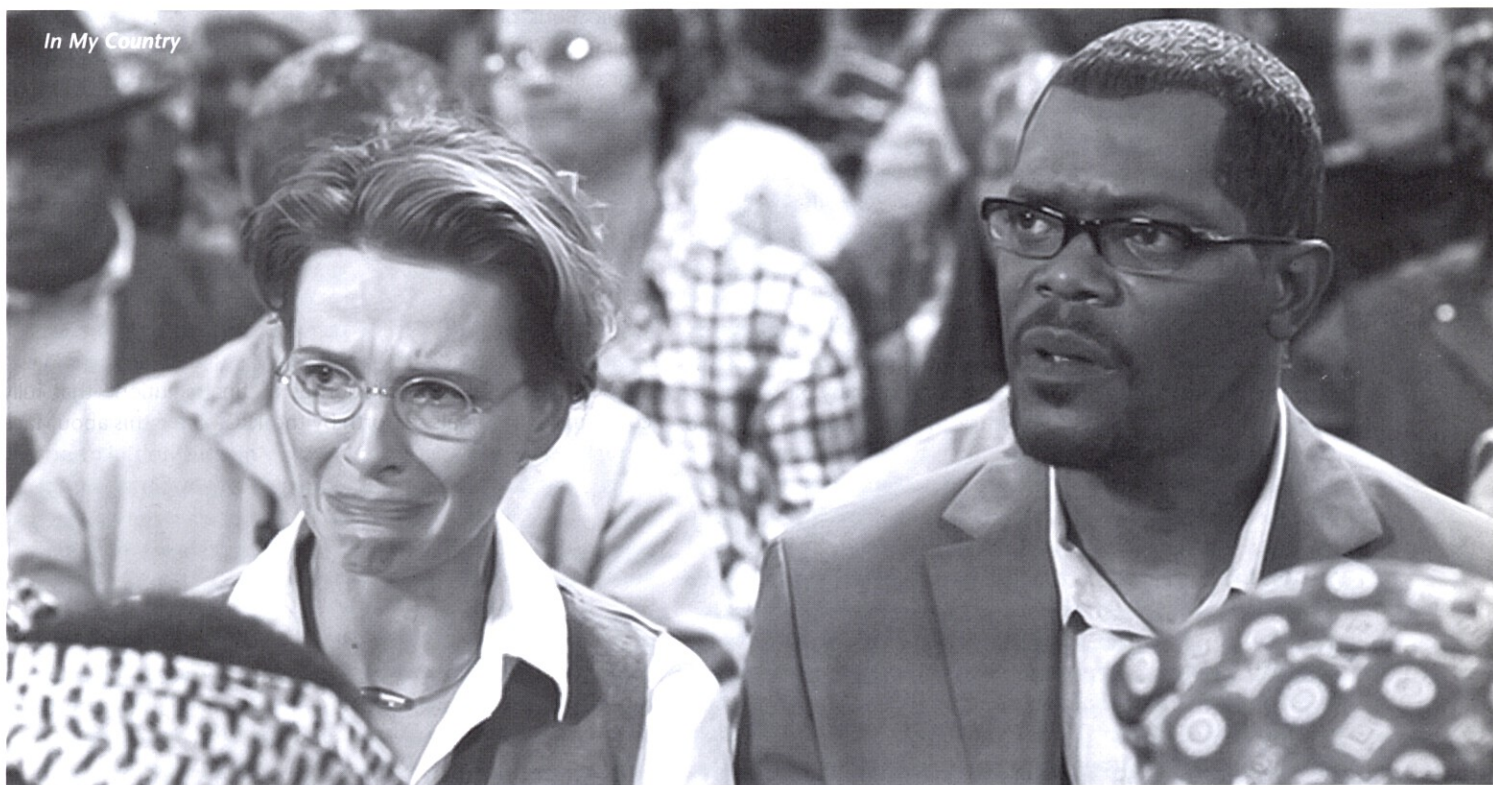
In My Country (United Kingdom, John Boorman, 2004) and



In My Country

ters, and that the "vast majority of South Africans are church members for whom Christianity is the most important ideological frame of reference", the Commission's institutional basis in Christian virtues is unsurprising.³ What does seem surprising, however, is the TRC's advocacy of a discourse of reconciliation and forgiveness in response to a historical period characterized by extreme and divisive violence. As a means of achieving such national unification, the TRC sought to bring together the perpetrators and victims of apartheid violence in hopes that, ideally, the perpetrators would repent for their acts and the victims would offer forgiveness, thus leading to reconciliation between individuals and ultimately for the nation at large.⁴

Cristobal Krusen's *Final Solution* (United States, 2001) deals



Night of Truth (*La Nuit de la Vérité*, Burkina Faso, Fanta Régina Nacro, 2004) both approach this challenge in distinct ways. Both represent the goals of reconciliation as challenged by individual discrepancies over the viability of reconciliation as a mode of collectively confronting traumatic histories that had very concrete impacts upon *individuals*. *In My Country* is more critical of the idealistic possibilities of the TRC's approach to reconciliation, portraying this reconciliation as a viable solution on a level of abstraction, but ultimately unsatisfactory in terms of its unifying

potential for actual individual persons. *Night of Truth* also portrays the challenges that a traumatic past poses to national reconciliation, but ultimately offers an alternate solution whereby the divisive past and a hopeful, united future are brought together in a site of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) that suggests reconciliation can only truly be achieved when efforts are made to keep the traumatic past in the sight of the present, rather than attempting to simply "forgive and forget."⁷

Despite these variations in approaching the problematic of

reconciliation, both films stress limitations to a reconciliatory policy of forgiveness and thus implicitly address the challenges that the South African TRC faced as it attempted to bring together victims and perpetrators of apartheid in an effort to heal a divisive past and look forward to a unified future. By highlighting practical discrepancies amongst individuals in conflicting factions (such as that between Wolfaardt and Moremi in *Final Solution*) that are, ideally, to be reconciled, but also conflicts *within* such factions, these films call attention to the performative essence of "nation" and expose how the cogency of this performative threatens to be undermined when the nation is conceived as a Subject prior to and separate from the diverse individuals that ultimately constitute it. Before discussing *In My Country* and *Night of Truth* though, a few words about the South African TRC are necessary, as well as a brief discussion of the challenges faced by a unitary body aiming to articulate a singular nation for a population of diverse (and divided) individuals.

Interpellation and the Problem of the National Subject

The 1995 establishment of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to confront the traumatic specter left on the nation by decades of brutality under the apartheid regime. Advocating the necessity of elucidating the "truth" of the nation's violently divisive past, the Commission brought victims and perpetrators together, often face to face, to publicly share testimonials in an effort to offer national catharsis, thus uniting those South Africans that had been politically and juridically divided along racial lines under the apartheid government. In an effort to encourage perpetrators to offer testimonies that would invariably betray shocking violence in which they had been personally involved, the Commission offered amnesty in exchange for their testimonies, provided the perpetrators could prove that their acts met a "political qualification"⁸ to which I will return in my discussion of *In My Country*.

Sarah L. Lincoln argues that one of the most substantial challenges facing the TRC was that many apartheid survivors felt that by granting amnesty to perpetrators, victims and their families were being "cheated of the justice they demand[ed]." They perceived that the needs of the "nation" were being placed ahead of their own as victims who had suffered unthinkable, tangible atrocities under the hands of the very individuals that the State (via the TRC) was now attempting to incorporate under the idealistic rubric of *national* unity.⁹ With this in mind, I would like to suggest that this challenge, posed by advocating the necessity of a *national* catharsis at the expense of individual catharses, is firmly embedded in the conception of "nation" as something ontologically stable that can be *uncovered* through a process of truth and reconciliation.

Of course, there is no such thing as a nation whose ontological status is a given, and the volatility of the concept of "nation" is manifest in the countless, unresolved debates regarding histories of nations, histories of the *ideas* of nation, and the purposes of nations.¹⁰ Thus, the "nation" lies not in any inherency that can be pointed to, identified as such, and then described. To use the terms of linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin, to identify and think about a "nation" - for example, about South Africa as a

unified country - does not comprise a constative utterance, i.e. something that is referring, either accurately or falsely, to something that already supposedly *is*.¹¹ Rather, the "identification" of a nation can more accurately be thought of as a *performative* act, in which "[t]he uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incidence in the performance of the act."¹² In this sense, identifying a nation, which does not inherently exist anywhere beyond its articulation, is a *performative* gesture since it successfully performs the act to which it refers, bringing into being that which it articulates rather than simply referring something that is *already there*.¹³

This distinction between constative and performative utterances provides a useful framework to contend with the challenges facing the reconciliatory ideals of the TRC. In short, the ideal of a unified South Africa, under which whites and blacks can live together without fear of racially-based segregation or violence, renders individuals as *subjects* to the nation. The implications of this subjection become clear when contextualized relative to Louis Althusser's discussion of ideological interpellation, which enables the interrogation of problems that arise when a "nation" to which individuals are to become subject is posited as *a priori*. In the case of the TRC, the Commission, acting in the name of the State, *interpellates* individuals by hailing all those who were "victimized" by the traumatic legacy of apartheid as united "South Africans".¹⁴ Through this act of interpellation, the individuals become subjugated as *subjects* to nation-state of South Africa (what Althusser would refer to as the *Subject*). I would like to suggest, however, that this subjection, this hailing as "united-South-African" in the name of a unified South Africa, implies the existence of a "nation" that precedes its imagination, perception and (performative) *articulation* by individuals (or, in the case of the TRC, organizations). Since the "nation of South Africa" depends for its existence on a performative articulation, the subjection of the individuals to the "nation of South Africa" (the Subject) depends upon an "*imaginary* relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."¹⁵ In other words, the Subject (the TRC's articulation of South Africa) to which individuals become related through the subjecting process of interpellation depends upon individuals *believing* this articulation, which would signal "concrete individuals" as *already* interpellated as "concrete subjects".¹⁶ Without this belief, the fictitious relation between individuals and the nation Subject fails to yield a real subjection, and the unification desired by the TRC's articulation of the nation Subject is undermined.

Lincoln acknowledges the complex challenges faced by the TRC and individual resistance to its goals, but asserts that the Commission constitutes "a necessary performative moment in the building of a new nation."¹⁷ This identification of the TRC's function as performative suggests that the Commission is not actually searching for some innate sense of South African unification that can be uncovered simply by unearthing an objective truth, and then *overcoming* this truth of division to move forward as a united nation. In the TRC's final report, Archbishop Tutu acknowledges that the "truth" sought by the TRC "will, in the very nature of things, never be fully revealed."¹⁸ In spite of the impossibility of any sense of objective "truth", Lincoln



argues (by invoking the work of trauma theorist Dori Laub) that the importance of the testimonies collected by the TRC lies not in the historical veracity of the testifiers' memories (which are obviously fallible to some extent, at least from a perspective seeking omniscient objectivity). Rather, the testimonials become events in themselves, a collection of fragments that "might ultimately 'shore the ruins' of South Africa's decimated history."¹⁹

However, this acknowledgment that the "truth" is forever beyond the hands of the TRC's goals still overlooks the limitations posed by the performative status of the TRC's articulation of a 'new,' unified South Africa. This articulation of South Africa - which must always be thought of as performative since there is no *a priori* South Africa to which one could constatively refer - invariably attempts to speak for a homogenous and inevitably theoretical "national subject." In this sense, the TRC's performative articulation of the South African nation under a singular ideal of truth, amnesty and reconciliation ultimately and problematically operates synecdochically. The Commission's can only be one articulation of the "nation," but it aims to speak for the whole nation. The TRC thus must overlook, or at least downplay imaginations, perceptions and articulations of the nation that are in tension with its ideal of a reconciled South Africa. Consequently, the TRC's performative articulation of a "unified South Africa" cannot accommodate conflicting interpretations that exist within the fully heterogeneous "national subject" that question the practical and ethical viability of a nation established through the TRC's specific articulation. Since the "performative necessity" of the TRC invariably conceives of the nation as a *Subject* to identified (or constituted as a Subject specifically articulated by the TRC) through a process of truth and reconciliation, it fails to acknowledge that the nation, and consequently, any

ideal of what the nation should be, only comes into existence via the articulation of heterogeneous individuals and thus exists as *a subject to those individuals* (and not vice versa). In the TRC's strategy of reconciliation, personal differences are effaced as the population is divided into "perpetrator" and "victim", and then unified through a *collective* victimhood (encapsulating both perpetrators and victims) by "establishing trauma as South Africans' common heritage".²⁰

Both *In My Country* and *Night of Truth* call attention to discrepancies amongst individuals that challenge reconciliatory ambitions, such as those of the TRC. These discrepancies are not simply between individuals comprising the different groups whose reconciliation is sought in order to end years of bloodshed, although these tensions are certainly important. But the volatile, performative status of "nation" is most evidenced in how the films highlight internal conflicts, either between victims or between perpetrators, which threaten to undermine idealistic notions of national reconciliation. In this sense, these films mobilize the problematic of nation by stressing conflicting individual understandings of what the "nation" should be, thus emphasizing the nation as not simply a performative, but a *conflicted* performative with heterogeneous voices grappling for a particular articulation of "nation" that will articulate a *particular* nation-subject (no longer Subject) into existence.

In Whose Country?

John Boorman's *In My Country* opens with a series of shots that formally allude to the destructive force that apartheid had on the South African nation. The film's title sequence juxtaposes images of an edenic landscape with those of violence committed along racially divided lines as white military officers and police roughly handle and beat blacks while other victims and

perpetrators look on nonchalantly. This edited conflict between idyllic and brutal content eventually yields to an archived video image of the newly freed Nelson Mandela. An auditory track that accompanies this image replays the conclusion of Mandela's inaugural presidential address in which he declares "Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another." As these words, and the rest of the address asserts, "the time for the healing of wounds has come."²¹ From the brutal specter of the apartheid-era emerges a land of idyllic beauty that had for decades been ruptured and divided, just as the images of violence interspersed throughout *In My Country's* title sequence rupture the continuity of a scenic tour through a South African nature that deceptively appears to be untouched by violence.

In My Country devotes large portions of its narrative to exploring and explaining the mission of the TRC, even going so far as to reconstruct testimonial encounters between victims and perpetrators, some of which (the film alleges in a title card) are derived from actual encounters. At the same time however, the depth and complexity of the racial rupture that the TRC sought to repair is never far from the forefront of the film's attention. After the opening sequence and Mandela's optimistic speech, the film cuts to the home of Anna Malan (Juliette Binoche), an Afrikaner poet sympathetic to the goals of the TRC who is assigned to cover a number of the testimonials for radio.²² In the middle of the night prior to her departure, Anna and the rest of her family awaken to the sounds of two black men sneaking into the cattle pen, which incites a violent reaction on the part of Anna's brother Boetie (Langley Kirkwood), as her father, Willem (Louis Van Niekerk) chides his daughter's sympathies with the TRC, caustically remarking "This is the new South Africa you admire so much Anna?"

Both Boetie and Willem invoke a racially divisive vocabulary of "us" vs. "them". After Boetie reveals that he shot one of the trespassers in the leg, he defends his actions as preemptive, arguing that since the abolishment of apartheid, "It's not *our* country anymore. It's open season on whites." The next morning, as the family bids Anna farewell, Willem also explicitly articulates his reservations about the steps being taken by the TRC by framing a division between the Afrikaners and South African blacks. While Anna's idealism is clear as she asserts that she "believes" in the TRC, her father demands to know when his daughter will "stop taking *their* side over *ours*," and pessimistically interprets the TRC's mission as "trying to break *us*, blaming everything on the Afrikaner." By holding on to a clear division between white and black, Anna's father and Boetie both immediately stand out as representatives of the outmoded narrative of racial (Afrikaner) survival, which was promulgated during the apartheid-era to assuage any guilt that members of the white minority may have felt in carrying out their "duties" in the name of the apartheid government.²³ And of course, this delineation of "us" vs. "them" is clearly antithetical to Mandela's, and similarly, the TRC's advocacy of a reconciliatory dialogue that seeks to (ultimately) pale such racial distinctions.

The tension between black and white in the midst of an institutional body devoted to reconciliation continually persists

throughout the film as Anna finds herself working alongside Langston Whitfield (Samuel L. Jackson), a black American journalist for the *Washington Post* who is thoroughly skeptical of the efficacy of TRC's strategy of reconciliation "when 90% of the country's wealth is still in the hands of the white minority." The film stresses the stark contrast between Anna's advocacy of the TRC and Langston's suspicion of it during their first interaction at a press conference prior to the opening testimonial hearings. Whereas Langston displays an explicitly practical skepticism that is manifest in the emphasis that he places on economics as a primary obstacle to reconciliation, Anna's idealistic hopes of a unified South African nation mirrors that of the TRC. This similarity between Anna and the Commission is brought to the fore during one of her questions in which she claims "South Africans" together, as a whole, have chosen "African justice, which is about reconciliation and not revenge," over Western justice, characterized by retribution.

It is this concept of African justice or *ubuntu*, that Langston (along with other reporters in the press conference) is especially resistant towards. *Ubuntu* was a seminal aspect of the nation-building goals of the TRC and, in the words of Archbishop Tutu, it is to be used to go 'beyond justice' to forgiveness and reconciliation.²⁴ If "[a]mnesty may be understood as the secular counterpart of forgiveness,"²⁵ Langston's resistance towards *ubuntu* and towards Anna's vehement defense of it can be seen as reflective of a wider skepticism towards *ubuntu* that perceived it as primarily a nation-building strategy that undermines the potential for many individuals to achieve any sense of cathartic relief through the punishment of their perpetrators.²⁶ Richard A. Wilson suggests that there is a clear *political* utility to the ideal of *ubuntu* which is an "'always-already there' element of pan-Africanist ideology," and that this ideal "should be recognized for what it is: an ideological concept with multiple meanings which conjoins human rights, restorative justice, reconciliation and nation building within the populist language of pan-Africanism."²⁷

It is important to note however that *In My Country* stresses that amnesty for perpetrators was not unconditionally guaranteed by the TRC, and was not to be granted "for crimes that were motivated by 'personal gain, or out of malice, ill will or spite.'"²⁸ Furthermore, amnesty was only available for those acts that were "political", that is, committed by a member or supporter of a known political organization or an employee of the state, acting proportionally "in furtherance of a political struggle."²⁹ The film simplifies this in a title card that states amnesty would be provided if the perpetrators "could prove they had followed orders." In one of his *Washington Post* articles entitled "South African Holocaust," Langston compares this provision with the infamous defense used by many Nazis at the Nuremberg trials. Accordingly, it is the TRC's willingness to accept this "justification" as fulfilling the necessary conditions for amnesty that ultimately drives Langston to the home of De Jager (Brendan Gleeson), a former Afrikaner colonel whose "bosses" have "thrown [him] to the wolves" by calling him "a psychopath who murdered and tortured for the fun of it." Of course Langston's purpose in getting to De Jager's "truth" is not

to rescue the colonel, whom he clearly despises, but to ensure that his superiors are not able to escape punishment by using De Jager as a scapegoat. This strategy serves to further embellish the distinction between Langston and Anna. While Langston's involvement with De Jager is motivated by a desire for retributive justice for individuals of high military rank, Anna's involvement in the TRC is fueled by her belief in its ideals.

This dissonance between Anna's idealism and Langston's skepticism culminates when she angrily confronts him regarding the aforementioned article in which he claims "Every white South African is as guilty as the perpetrators themselves." When Langston responds by demanding she confront the "details" of "what your government's been doing in your name for the past 40 years," the abstract nature of her idealism shatters. As she is now unable to ascertain how to feel about her own role in the TRC hearings, and in the historical past that they confront, Anna bursts out in a laughing/crying fit during the testimony of an Afrikaner as he describes how a landmine took the lives of his family. This is the only instance in the film that has a white individual positioned as a victim in a TRC setting, which acts as a reminder that both whites and blacks suffered during the decades of apartheid, stressing a common heritage of trauma. It is thus essential that this reminder comes almost immediately after Anna's defenses of her *own* status as Afrikaner are thrown into crisis, blurring any clear racial delineations between victim, perpetrator, and bystander. This racial blurring and the idealistic possibilities that it yields for reconciliation is pushed further, however, as Langston removes Anna from the hearing as a result of her laughing/crying, and the two end up falling into bed in a sexual embrace as a fade-out implies a reconciliation of sorts as boundaries between black and white, perpetrator and victim, and Anna and Langston are broken down.

While it may be tempting to view this sexual culmination as, in the words of Desson Thomson's review for the *Washington Post*, "keeping with the cheesiest of romance formulas,"³⁰ I would argue that if one views this sexual act as a symbolic reconciliation, it is a symbol that is self-consciously platitudinous. It is after this act that the idealism of the TRC's rhetoric of amnesty and reconciliation is proven fallible at the practical level. It is telling, for instance, that the only explicit example of forgiveness at a hearing that the film visualizes is when a child hugs the repentant murderer of his parents, suggesting that a degree of innocence is necessary for the goals set out by the TRC.

Moreover, the sexualized reconciliation between Anna and Langston, accompanied in the film by soft music and romantic lighting, has very explicit, practical consequences on Anna's marriage. When Anna "confesses" her infidelity to her husband, clearly operating under the important role that "truth" plays in the TRC's understanding of unification, her husband berates her by sarcastically invoking notions of forgiveness, amnesty and truth, demonstrating that he believes such virtues to be ludicrous in this situation: "You expect me to forgive you? You want amnesty from me? Two can play at that game. Let's have a fucking hearing. You can confess and he can tell me whether you're telling the truth or not."

But the practical limitations of reconciliation and amnesty

that come to the fore after Langston and Anna's sexual encounter do not end with its consequences on her marriage. Anna's decision to confess to her husband occurs after she discovers that her brother participated in the same acts of atrocity that De Jager is seeking amnesty for. Ultimately De Jager's application for amnesty is revoked as the court determines that while he was acting under orders his actions were not "proportional" to the objectives sought. Accordingly, after Anna discovers that the truth of Boetie's collusion with De Jager and confronts him about his past, the revelation of his actions prompts him to commit suicide. In this case, the emergence of the truth is far from emancipatory for Anna's brother, who ultimately takes justice into his own hands to evade the justice of the Commission, whom he knows will turn down his pleas for amnesty now that the extent of his actions has been revealed and a precedent has been set with De Jager. As such, in the cases of both Anna's brother and between her and her husband, the truth is far from a guarantee of reconciliation, serving rather as an instrument of division.

With these challenges to the TRC's conception of truth, reconciliation and amnesty in mind, it is tempting to view the film as conforming to Langston's skepticism of *ubuntu*. However, just as Anna's idealism of *ubuntu* is challenged when put into practice, Langston's skepticism is also rendered somewhat abstract by his own position as an outsider (American) in the midst of the TRC hearings. While De Jager's conviction, which simultaneously serves as retribution for his own action as well as making possible further convictions of his superiors, may have fulfilled one of Langston's goals, the film concludes by challenging Langston's own advocacy of retribution, often associated with "Western" justice.³¹

After leaving a celebration at the conclusion of the TRC hearings, the car carrying Langston and Dumi (Menzi Ngubane), a black South African that acted as an assistant and guide for both Langston and Anna, is stopped on a dark road by a small group of blacks carrying guns that the two men mistake to be a carjacking. Throughout the film, Dumi's garrulous manner stands out starkly relative to the film's predominantly somber diegesis, and in the preceding scene, Anna makes this quite explicit as she bids him farewell, thanking him "for making me laugh when there was nothing to laugh about." As such, when the armed group accosts Dumi, Langston is dumbfounded as they accuse the guide of betraying them and other colleagues by identifying them during the apartheid era. Dumi's defense that his family's lives would have been in danger if he had not followed orders is useless in this confrontation that occurs outside the TRC's rhetoric of amnesty. In accordance with Wilson's assertion that in spite of the TRC's mandate, embracement of the ideals of retributive justice was still very prevalent in popular mindset (see footnote 6), one of the men shoots Dumi in the stomach and leaves him to die as Langston stands over him in shocked horror. As such, it is not so much that the film ultimately takes Langston's "side" over Anna's. Rather, this conclusion cautions against a universalized approach, as advocated by the TRC, as a means to contend with a history that affected people on individualized levels.

Night of Truth, Site of Memory

Fanta Régina Nacro's *Night of Truth* represents similar challenges to reconciliatory solutions, but is situated in an unnamed African country suffering from a bloody conflict between the ruling Nayaks and the opposition Bonandés. After a truce is declared between the two factions, a celebratory feast is planned in the Bonandé village, hosted by Col. Théo (Moussa Cissé). While many Bonandés are relieved at the prospect of peace, there are clear instances of dissention, especially from Tomoto (Rasmane Ouedraogo), an eccentric Bonandé who views the colonel as a traitor for inviting the Nayak president, Lt. Soulu (Adama Ouedraogo) to the celebration. Moreover, like Anna's father and brother in *In My Country*, Tomoto's hatred of the Nayaks is espoused through a vocabulary that clearly posits the Nayaks as *others* apart from the Bonandés. As a group of women in the village are preparing for the feast, Tomoto enters the kitchen and declares, "The Nayaks are not men like us. If you catch one you'll see. He'll have scales on his skin. Like a snake!"

Although suspicions persist as Nayak President Soulu, his wife Edna, and his armed security forces arrive at the Bonandé village, the feast commences, and the idealistic possibility of reconciliation appears to become a reality as both sides eventually lay down their guns. However, over the course of the dinner, through dialogue and flashbacks, the film gradually reveals that Théo was responsible for the castration and death of Soulu and Edna's son, Michele. Like *In My Country*, this emergence of truth does not afford unconditional reconciliation and amnesty. When Théo begs Edna for her forgiveness after confessing his role in killing her son, she has him swarmed by Nayak guards and cooked alive over a fire as a form of retributive justice. When the rest of the celebrating crowd discovers the murder of the colonel, Soulu kills his wife for disrupting the "peace process" in another instance of retributive justice. Certainly these acts of violence explicitly demonstrate how conflicts not only *between* but *within* opposing factions complicate the possibilities for reconciliation, especially since it is ultimately Tomoto's interference that prevents a warning of Edna's murderous intentions from reaching Théo. However, with these dissentions in mind, *Night of Truth* goes further than *In My Country*, and uses these acts of divisive violence as means to achieve reconciliatory peace.

In *Night of Truth*, reconciliation cannot occur merely through idealistic words, but through visible means. While Soulu initially declares, "Let's forget the past" at the opening of the celebration, the violent events of the "night of truth" shatter the idealism of this declaration. In an attempt to reinstitute the possibility of reconciliation, the next morning the president declares that Edna and Théo will be buried in the same grave as a visual reminder of the unification of the formerly conflicting groups. The presence of this grave as a *reminder* hearkens a contradictory challenge that the TRC's goals of reconciliation invariably mobilizes. As Lincoln notes, "The pressing question remains: how do we—as individuals and as a nation—account for simultaneous imperatives to remember and to forget South Africa's traumatic past? How, especially, do we "remember" apartheid without reinscribing its divisiveness in the present?"³² With this challenge of contradiction in mind, the Nayak/Bonandé grave

constitutes a site of memory, what historian Pierre Nora refers to as a *lieu de mémoire*.

Nora argues that a relatively recent perception of an "acceleration of history [or] an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good"³³ has overturned conceptions of "history" as a mode of truly accessing the past. The very emergence of a "history of history" is a "tangible sign of the split between history and memory."³⁴ If, as Nora suggests, history as an "entire tradition has developed as...the reconstitution of the past without lacunae or faults,"³⁵ then the conceptualization of a "history of history" challenges this perceived totality, revealing that "history" does not actually access any sense of the past other than as a mediated, historiographic *memory*. This historical self-reflexivity thus results in a "historiographical anxiety [when history] discovers that it is the victim of memories that it has sought to master."³⁶

In response to this perceived acceleration of history and the consequent disappearance of the present into an inaccessible past, Nora identifies an increasing reliance on *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory that seek to resist the disappearance of the present. Some examples that Nora argues are indicative of this contemporary tendency towards *lieux de mémoires* include obsessive archiving of even the most banal details,³⁷ and an implication of individual duty to act as one's own historian, documenting one's *own* history so that it will not disappear into the chasm of the past.³⁸

In a sense, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* stands in stark contrast to the imperative of the TRC to squarely localize the trauma of apartheid in South Africa's past so that its divisiveness will not continue to haunt a unified present and future. However, *Night of Truth* appropriates the concept of *lieux de mémoires* by establishing a site that conforms to the three senses that Nora argues are essential for such a site: it is material (a grave), symbolic (standing in for unification), and functional (acting as a reminder).³⁹ As the Nayaks and Bonandés gather around the joint burial of Edna and Théo, Soulu stresses the importance of this monumental *reminder* that simultaneously embodies the divisiveness and violence of the past by containing the bodies of two murder victims whose deaths were consequent in some way of tribal divisions, and the hopes of unification in the future by placing the bodies of the murderer and the murdered side by side for "eternity." Because suspicion both between and within the Nayaks and the Bonandés suggests that there is no *a priori* unified state that a gesture of reconciliation can appeal to, the deaths of Théo and Edna can be thought of as sacrifices that afford the establishment of a site of memory that is a necessary condition for reconciliation. Even Tomoto, who initially branded Théo a traitor, visits the gravesite to tell the colonel, "The men are now considerate to each other. You know, your death brought them together."

While Soulu's initial address to the Nayaks and Bonandés encouraged the two sides to "forget the past," his decision to construct a gravesite monument, an embodiment of past conflicts, suggests that the memory of this past is necessary to avoid such division in the future. The president refers to the Nayak-Bonandé grave as a "strong symbol [that will] mingle our blood

so that this hate vanishes forever." This symbolic establishment then becomes a necessity for reconciliation in *Night of Truth* since the unification between the Nayaks and the Bonandés can only exist as an idealistic performative utterance. The film implicitly acknowledges this performative nature as Tomoto identifies the importance of *naming* in the strategy of reconciliation as he sits beside Théo and Edna's grave and remarks, "The Bonandés and the Nayaks? There aren't Bonandés and Nayaks anymore. Now we're all Bonandayaks." The *lieu de mémoire* that is the "Bonandayak" grave thus acts as a performative site, one that brings into being that which it articulates (unification). But its function as a reconciliatory performative overturns the TRC's emphasis on "erasing" the divisiveness of the past as the grave acts as a visual reminder of the dangers that can lie in notions of difference and otherness.

Epilogue:

A New National Narrative

While *In My Country* and *Night of Truth* point to the challenges facing the TRC's mode of reconciling the nation, the questions that they raise do not seek to undermine its ideals of amnesty, forgiveness and unification. What they do, however, is stress the challenges that a traumatic historical past poses to these ideals that look towards the future. As Wilson's comments regarding the pan-Africanist ideological functioning of *ubuntu* suggest (see note 25), while the TRC's idealization of national unification sought to reconcile a divided nation, it simultaneously acted as a mode of legitimizing the new government by attempting to foster a strong sense of shared nationalist identity. "If civic nationalism requires strong states, then a general problem besetting transitional regimes [like the South African government that established the TRC] is that they often inherit a significantly debilitated state in crisis, with unstable, illegitimate, and impaired institutions."⁴⁰

In this sense, these films acknowledge that the establishment of the TRC's conception of a unified South Africa is merely the establishment of a new national *narrative* that espouses racial unification, seeking to contradict the apartheid-era's divisive "narrative of racial survival."⁴¹ And of course, this narrative establishment is dependent on the TRC's function as a "necessary performative moment in the building of the new nation."⁴² But this new nation is *articulated into being* by the TRC, not simply identified or uncovered as something that *already is*. Again, the South Africa of the TRC is a performative that *In My Country* and *Night of Truth* implicitly challenge by interrogating the strategy of reconciliation advocated by the Commission, which seeks to constitute a *unified* national subject out of a population whose history saw individuals violently divided along planes of *difference*. By exposing the performative limitations of this constitution, the films imply that *recognizing* the "unified South Africa" of the TRC as a performative gesture is a necessary step in contending with the divisiveness that persists on a practical level in the midst of an idealistic exercise of unification.

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Notes

- 1 Lyn S. Graybill, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Miracle or Model?* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2002): 5-6.
- 2 Ibid., 3.
- 3 Ibid., 25.
- 4 Ibid., 39.
- 5 For a historical discussion of the formal institution of the Final Solution at the 1942 Wannsee Conference, see Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana Press, 1986): 280-293.
- 6 Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 25.
- 7 One character in *Night of Truth* in particular shifts from an advocacy of forgetting the past to remembering the past as a means of achieving reconciliation. I will explore this in greater detail below.
- 8 Graybill, 7.
- 9 Sarah L. Lincoln, "This Is My History: Trauma, Testimony, and Nation-Building in the 'New' South Africa," *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003): 41.
- 10 For a large selection of essays that deal with these and other issues related to the problematic of the modern nation, see *Nationalism*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- 11 J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975): 4.
- 12 Ibid., 8. Here, the "act" Austin is referring to is a "bet," which only comes into being through the utterance of "I bet X." But of course, other such acts or utterances include declarations (I declare war!), which bring into being that which is being declared, or naming (I christen this ship Y or I declare this nation Z). For a distinction between constative and performative utterances, see Austin, 3-8.
- 13 Homi K. Bhabha's observations regarding the importance of *narration* to the constitution of nations specifically are also useful in this regard. See Bhabha, "Narrating the Nation," in *Nationalism*. Eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 306-312.
- 14 For a more in depth treatment of ideological interpellation, see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards and Investigation)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1991): 152-165.
- 15 Ibid., 153.
- 16 Ibid., 162.
- 17 Lincoln, 43.
- 18 Quoted in Ibid., 38.
- 19 Ibid., 39.
- 20 Ibid., 27.
- 21 For the full text of Mandela's Inauguration Address, see http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/mandela.html
- 22 Anna's story is based on the experience of Afrikaans-language poet and journalist Antjie Krog which she documented in her book *The Skull of My Country*. *In My Country* is an adaptation of this novel.
- 23 Ibid., 27-29.
- 24 Wilson, 11.
- 25 Graybill, 57.
- 26 See note 9 above.
- 27 Wilson, 13.
- 28 Graybill, 62-63.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Desson Thomson, "In My Country: Unjustifiable." *The Washington Post* 1 April 2005: WE45. Interestingly, Thomson also remarks on Langston as a *Washington Post* reporter, assuring readers that "if Langston really worked for *The Post*, his professional days would be numbered for his overbearing behavior and editorially inappropriate questions at the hearings. And his illicit affair with Anna wouldn't help."
- 31 This comparison is made explicitly in the film. See also Wilson, 25.
- 32 Lincoln, 40.
- 33 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.
- 34 Ibid., 9.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., 10.
- 37 Ibid., 13.
- 38 Ibid., 15.
- 39 Ibid., 19.
- 40 Wilson, 17.
- 41 Lincoln, 28.
- 42 Ibid., 43.

Toronto Workers' Art in Global Hollywood

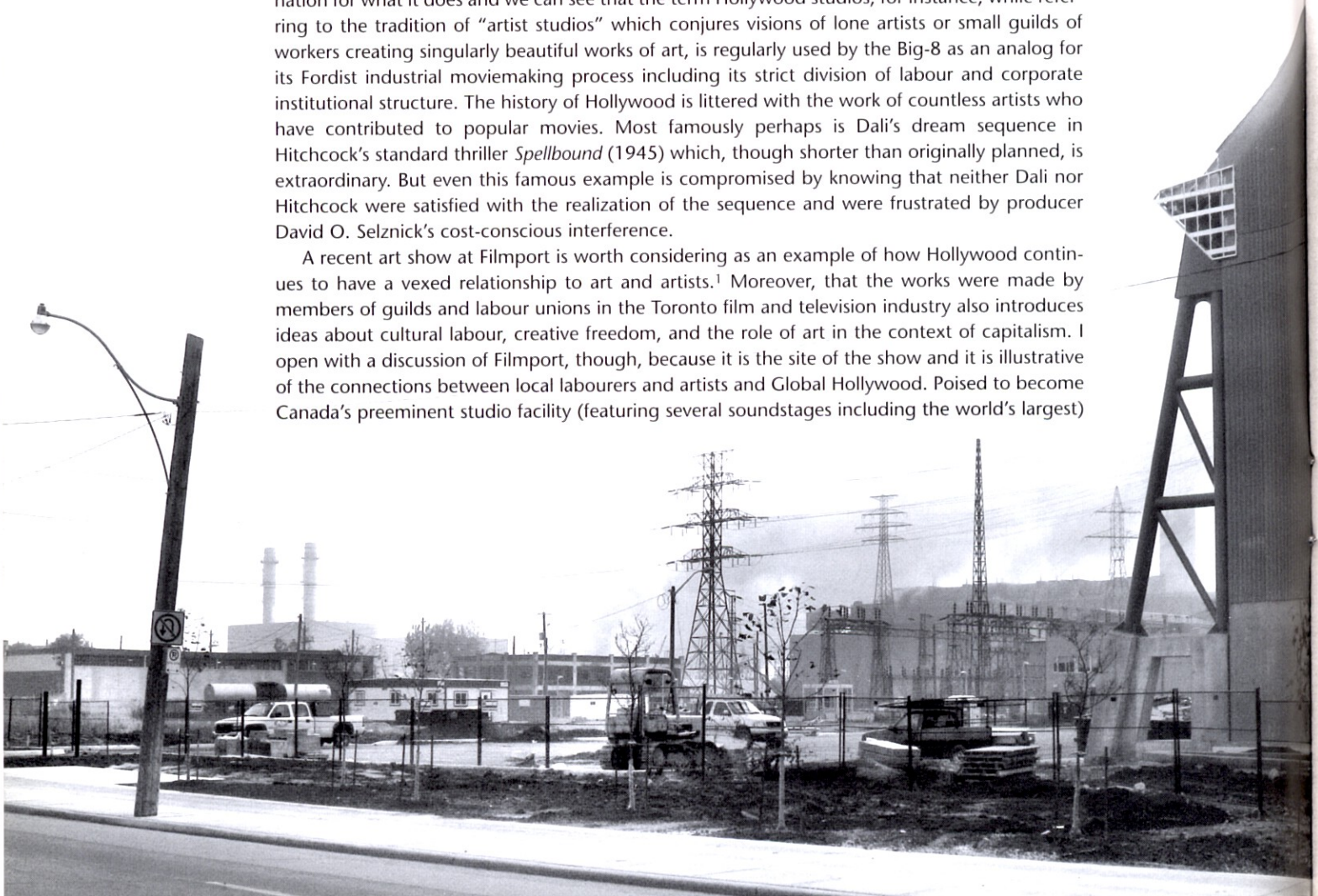
JOHN McCULLOUGH

**Off camera group art show at Filmport Studios, 225 Commissioners St., Toronto
October 3-18** The pieces in the show are viewable at: offcameraatfilmport2008.blogspot.com

Hollywood has long had an awkward relationship to art. Often considered more a communication technology than a fine art, filmmaking (and especially Hollywood filmmaking), has regularly been judged aesthetically impoverished and not really art by traditional standards that measure aesthetic achievement in direct relation to autonomy, originality, and authenticity. By contrast, Hollywood has distinguished itself by playing not to elite audiences but to mass taste with entertainment spectacles that flaunt technology and cultural commodification all the while maintaining tight control over, and often fighting with, its artisan labour. This antagonistic relationship between artists and the perceived high culture of the art world has carried over into the thematic content of many Hollywood films, especially comedies, in which art and artists are routinely lampooned and ridiculed. So much so that the gulf between the sphere of art and popular movies often seems overwhelming.

At the same time, Hollywood has obviously also borrowed much from the traditions and practices of various arts and many theorists, critics and promoters of the industry have argued that movies are but a new form of art. Along with relying on all other art forms for its aesthetic styles and formal designs, there are also a variety of instances in which Hollywood uses art as an explanation for what it does and we can see that the term Hollywood studios, for instance, while referring to the tradition of "artist studios" which conjures visions of lone artists or small guilds of workers creating singularly beautiful works of art, is regularly used by the Big-8 as an analog for its Fordist industrial moviemaking process including its strict division of labour and corporate institutional structure. The history of Hollywood is littered with the work of countless artists who have contributed to popular movies. Most famously perhaps is Dali's dream sequence in Hitchcock's standard thriller *Spellbound* (1945) which, though shorter than originally planned, is extraordinary. But even this famous example is compromised by knowing that neither Dali nor Hitchcock were satisfied with the realization of the sequence and were frustrated by producer David O. Selznick's cost-conscious interference.

A recent art show at Filmport is worth considering as an example of how Hollywood continues to have a vexed relationship to art and artists.¹ Moreover, that the works were made by members of guilds and labour unions in the Toronto film and television industry also introduces ideas about cultural labour, creative freedom, and the role of art in the context of capitalism. I open with a discussion of Filmport, though, because it is the site of the show and it is illustrative of the connections between local labourers and artists and Global Hollywood. Poised to become Canada's preeminent studio facility (featuring several soundstages including the world's largest)



Filmport is in the process of consolidating its infrastructure and its business advantage in a competitive global media market.² Even in the local jurisdiction it will have competition with the proposed studio complex at Dupont Street and Ossington Avenue that is part of the Pinewood Studios brand and has the participation of Ridley and Tony Scott. Even while the stages are being built and the streets paved, the strategy of selling Filmport is fully underway. Its website is thorough and detailed and service contracts have begun to trickle in (e.g., George Romero shot his follow-up to *Diary of the Dead* at Filmport).³ Because Filmport is not just a film studio, but a “convergence district,” its eventual goal is to develop a media sector area in Toronto that will become dominant in the municipality and significant in the global market. Built on abandoned port lands, the concept illustrates what David Harvey has described as “accumulation by dispossession” by which abandoned lands are re-purposed, to use current lingo.⁴ In most cases such dilapidated real estate is recapitalized at below-market costs and financed through subsidy programs. Taxpayer groups have often criticized the use of tax revenue for private property development and, in the case of the Canadian media sector, such deals have been also criticized because media producers get their own variety of subsidies to make films and television programming in Canada. These layers of tax money offered as business incentive to a privileged few in Global Hollywood constitute part of the background to Filmport.

The principal entrepreneur in the Filmport experiment is Ken Ferguson who, among other things, is a real estate developer and president of Toronto Film Studios. In an obvious sense, Filmport is an attempt to consolidate what is a geographically dispersed media sector in the city. Moreover, the development in the city of a comprehensive full-service studio is increasingly necessary to remain competitive in the context of Global Hollywood. In fact, the concept of developing an abandoned plot of land into a media district has enormous force in contemporary urban planning and has been successful in Toronto in the last two decades. The development of Liberty Village, West Queen West, and the Distillery District as creative industry districts is proof of the economic value of cultural industries including their ability to inspire complex networks of business, workplace, and residential relationships. From the perspective of a media sector development strategy it is not surprising then to find an art show in the midst of this convergence district although it is somewhat inspired to actually locate it on the factory floor, in one of the completed soundstages. This is only a temporary location, though, as the owners hope to have the stages rented in short order and convert their investment in these massive spaces into revenue. It would be wrong to think that the space is not worth something as a gallery, though, and the owners recognize the cultural value that accrues to support of the arts. Or, at least, to gestures that signify as much.

If the location of the show reveals that it is part of a land development strategy and is intimately connected to efforts meant to promote Global Hollywood in Toronto, it follows that the pieces of art in the show reflect these forces and power relations as well. For instance, all the work is highly competent on the level of craft and skill and one appreciates the training that these workers bring to the job each day. But, like the detailed work they contribute to Hollywood film and television culture,

these pieces impress one as not very unique and almost all of it seems primarily designed to be commercially viable. In fact, the principle object of the show is sales and the group that organizes it annually, *Off camera*, is conceived as an art marketing project. Inevitably the work rarely digs into the workers’ immediate lives or their working life and the subjects seem vague and only abstractly related to the artist.

In many cases, the same skill set used for the Hollywood gig is applied to the crafting of the pieces and similar media are used but the content of the pieces is never located in the workplace of commercial film and television production. Despite the fact that entry into the show was by rite of union membership it is notable that the art never refers to the work these artists get paid to do and the spaces they typically occupy – there are no paintings of location shooting, no photographs of sets, no busts of bosses, or drawings of recent job actions or strikes. So we get no point of view from the workers about the jobs they do or the industry of which they are part. This is art by workers but it is definitely not workers’ art as we have come to understand that term and the leftist critical stance it suggests. In a way, the art works on display may be more usefully appreciated as a form of compensation to the artists who have had to negotiate a living in the context of industrial filmmaking. While the work often mimics modernist forms and seems therefore to aspire to something that would approximate a unique personal vision this always falls short of being a fully realized aesthetic statement. The grasp of the artists seems atrophied by playing it safe or sublimating (e.g., abstraction and decorative arts prevail) and we get the sense that, in repressing the workplace, these works manifest the “conditions of practice” of the artists’ particular place in the Toronto film and television labour pool. Given that these workers, who are also homeowners and consumers, are inclined to promote the expansion of Global Hollywood to Toronto there is no doubt that they would also support using art, their art as it turns out, as leverage in attracting clients to Filmport. In this sense they seem to illustrate the alienated and reified identities that Adorno, for one, associates with the culture industries. In this context, which is an affirmation of capitalist relations, it would be the role of autonomous and great art to be critical and develop a design strategy based on “negative aesthetics”. This would presume an outside to the current conjuncture and that survival there would be synonymous with transcending the contradictions of living under capitalism. That is a fantasy worthy of a movie.

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Notes

- 1 The pieces in the show are viewable at: <http://offcameraatfilmport2008.blogspot.com/> (accessed December 9, 2008).
- 2 Marsha Ann Tate, “Filmport enters global studio war,” *Playback*, Vol. 22 no. 16, April 28, 2008: 5-6.
- 3 The Filmport website is at: <http://www.filmport.ca/> (accessed December 9, 2008).
- 4 David Harvey, “Accumulation by Dispossession,” in *The New Imperialism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137-182.

Kiarostami's Life Lessons

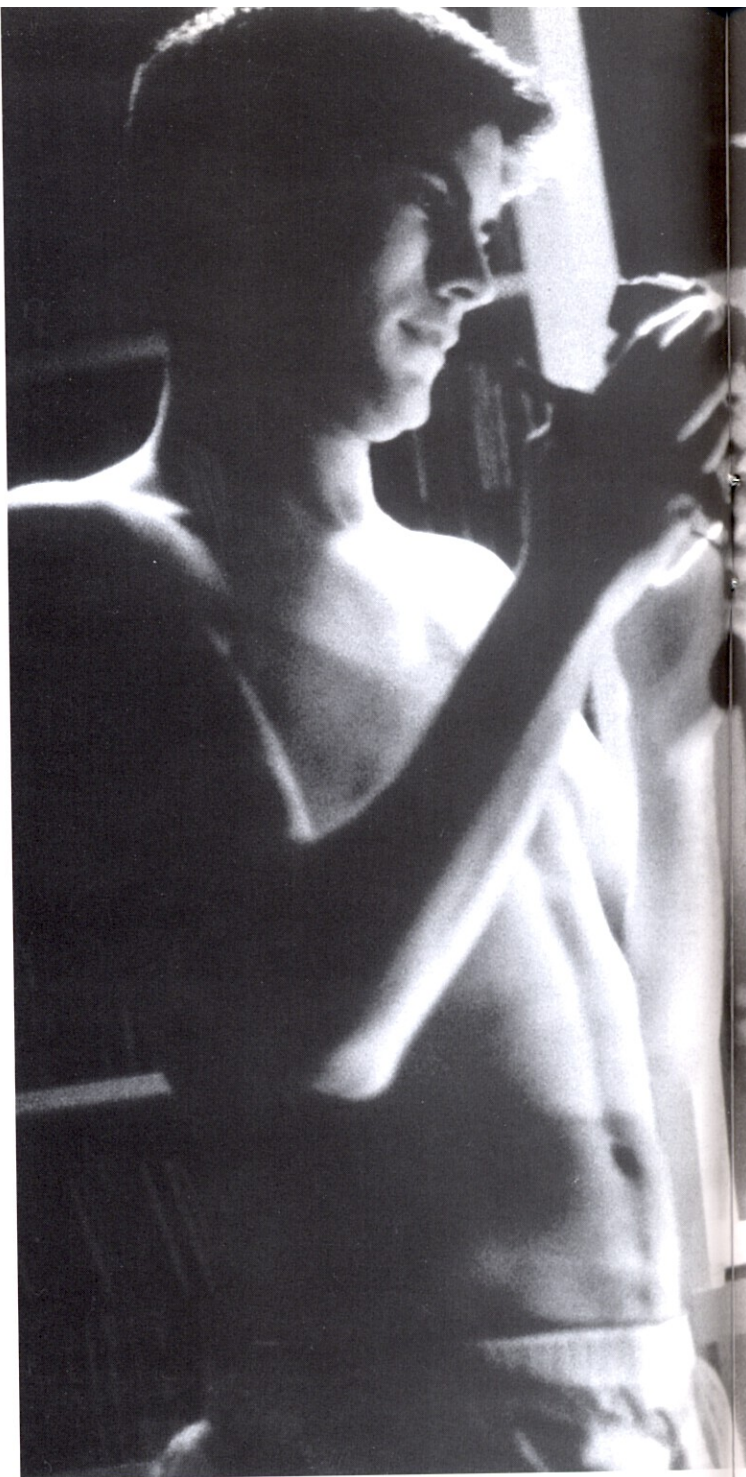
HOW ART FLOURISHES
WHERE IT WOULD SUFFER,
AND STRUGGLES
WHERE IT SHOULD THRIVE

DAN JONES

I presented an earlier version of the following essay in 2000, shortly after I had seen *Taste of Cherries* and *American Beauty* each for the first time. As the people running this country continue to flirt with the possibility of a war with Iran, it strikes me that many of the arguments herein have become even more salient. Kiarostami has gone on to make even better films, while Sam Mendes has continued to produce lightweight, middle brow schlock, dressed up in "realism" including, coincidentally enough, a film about American military action in the Middle East. The basic quandary considered in the essay remains intact. In Iran everything, including the film industry, is controlled by the state which makes and enforces its laws according to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. In the west the only constraints upon art are imposed by the market. It would seem the natural order of things that the arts would be squashed by totalitarian, religious fundamentalism and encouraged within a capitalist democracy. However, just the opposite seems to be the case and I compare and contrast the two films discussed in this essay to show how and why.

Along with Kiarostami Iran is home to Jafar Panahi, Samira and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, all of whom are among the most important living filmmakers on the planet. The West's "serious" filmmakers du jour, which would include Sam Mendes, Paul Thomas Anderson, Todd Solondz, Darren Aronofsky, Paul Haggis, M. Night Shyamalan and Ang Lee¹, represent a different class of filmmaker for reasons I will examine shortly. Kiarostami, in fact, is one of the great filmmakers in the history of the medium; he's right there with Tarkovsky, Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer. Yet the United States government will not allow him to enter this country, because he is construed as a "hostile" national. As policy makers and citizens consider the possible ramifications of a war with Iran, I would suggest that we count among them the potential loss of current and future Kiarostamis, Makhmalbafs, and Panahis. If this leaves us with more middle brow fodder that passes for art film in this country, the damage done will be far more catastrophic in the long term than the results of winning or losing a war.

The cinema is not dead—not globally anyway. Yet it may very well be dying in America. There are numerous economic factors



which contribute to the shrinking opportunities for independent filmmakers to make movies and find distribution for their work. The situation is so convoluted and so bleak that the folks who stand the best chance of getting their films made are documentarians, makers of shorts and video artists. Many of the members of this tiny group are professors and instructors in film programs, relying on grants, university funds and access to free equipment and editing rooms to get their work finished. Most of the unique, independent voices of American film rarely have a chance to be heard. Occasionally something will slip through. For instance some attention was paid to Phil Morrison's *Junebug* when Amy Adams was inexplicably noticed by the Academy of Motion Pictures and nominated for an Oscar.

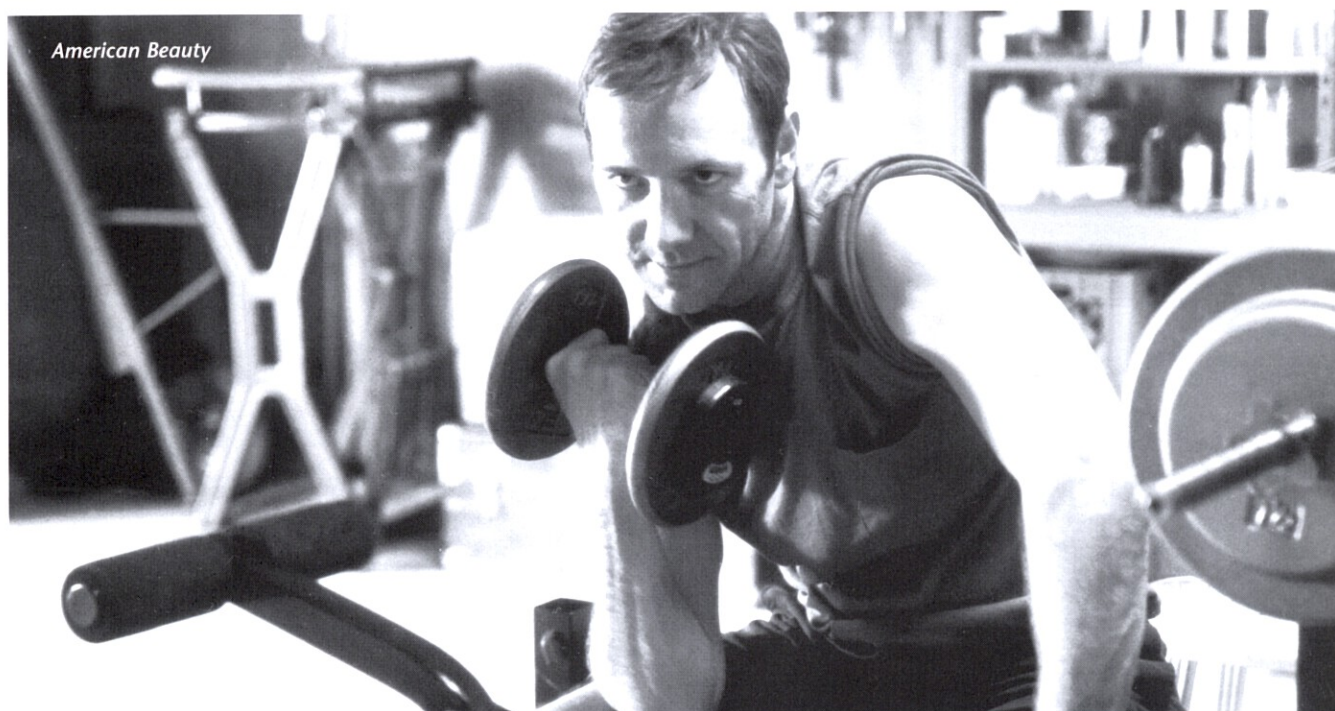


American Beauty

Such is a rare exception indeed, and most of the discussion and dissemination of independent film, art film or just "serious" film in this country is devoted to the quasi-independent, faux art of a film culture that, while serious about marketing to a different demographic than *Terminator IV* or *The Sisterhood of Traveling Pants*, seems little interested in making, promoting and distributing intellectually and emotionally demanding films. There are a slew of filmmakers in this country (named above) whose version of cutting edge, independent art is to employ the tried and true Hollywood storytelling model, and give it a twist by inserting some salacious sexual detail or scene of gratuitous violence.

To demonstrate the difference between film art and light

transgression masquerading as art, I would like to compare and contrast two films that are superficially about the same subject. A key difference between an art film and what passes for an art film in America is the weight of and insistence upon the delivery of an ideological message. In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche argues against what he regards as a misconstrued understanding of "art for art's sake." He concludes that the notion, as it is typically used, is preposterous, and suggests that art exists always for the sakes of those who would partake of helping us all to overcome morality. At the same time, he explains, we have art and morality for the same psychological reason, but art is better at pointing toward truth than morality. Essentially, Nietzsche wants art to replace morality. This is what is in the



back of my mind (and what I hope to move to the front of the reader's mind, as it were), as I discuss the lessons to be learned from *Taste of Cherry*. I am not talking about Kiarostami giving the viewer rules to live by, but ways to live that run deeper than concepts like 'morals' and 'rules.' Kiarostami gives us various kinds of *temporal and emotional training* that help us relate to other human beings in more sensitive ways.

Perhaps they are exotic in sound and appearance to western eyes and ears, but Kiarostami's characters owe their *foreign-ness* more to the demands they make on the viewers' patience and imagination than to their language and skin tone. With *Taste of Cherry* and indeed the rest of his work, Kiarostami tries to help the viewer rediscover emotions that have been lost, forgotten or

otherwise trampled by the psychic and spiritual sacrifices seemingly required to function in society without incident. Watching his films, in Kiarostami's own words, is "like opening a window in a stuffy room" (*Film Comment* 24). *Taste of Cherry* affords one the experience of refreshing and enlivening forgotten and suppressed consciousness. It makes no intellectual point, but rather gives one much needed practice in listening attentively to the rhythms of speech and in observing the subtle interplay between words and gestures.

Kiarostami's films do what most American films, including many highly regarded independent movies, are not equipped to do: they teach us how to *live deeply*, in the Buddhist sense, to get more out of living. The American filmmakers I would con-

trast with Kiarostami provide plenty of emotional experiences, but like virtually everything else popular culture has to offer, that emotion is easily digestible and quickly forgotten. The first time I saw *American Beauty* it struck me that it shares with *Taste of Cherry* many of the same intellectual concerns; it does suggest the ideal that "life is worth living." Kiarostami actually commented on *Taste of Cherry* that, "The movie is about the possibility of living, and how we have the choice to live. Life isn't forced on us. That's the main theme of the movie" (26). If the same can be claimed of *American Beauty*, I want to ask why its expression of the same theme seems superficial and insignificant in comparison. *American Beauty* is ostensibly true-to-life and is widely (or at least, was once) regarded for its gritty realism and honesty. However, it is not true in any sense. It is not an accurate reflection of the way people talk, interact or relate. It is caught up in its own irony so much that, even as a reflection of cold and antiseptic suburban American life, it comes off lifeless and rings hollow.

In an essay on Carl Dreyer, Ray Carney says, "Shallow works of art, like shallow people, yield their meanings in a minute, but you must spend time with deep ones" (Reflections). Kiarostami shows this. Badii behaves much differently than the characters in most American films. Most conspicuous in his behavior is that which he does *not* do. Badii does not constantly narrate his every desire and perception. Personality is difficult to understand and getting at it is often arduous and mysterious, if it is worth getting to at all. One watches Mr. Badii for two hours and finds out why he wants to kill himself. In stark contrast is *American Beauty*'s Lester Bernam whom one knows not five minutes before one knows everything about him. The opening of the movie is literally a detailed account of the man's life, from "My name is Lester Bernam" to "Masturbating in the shower is the high point of my day."

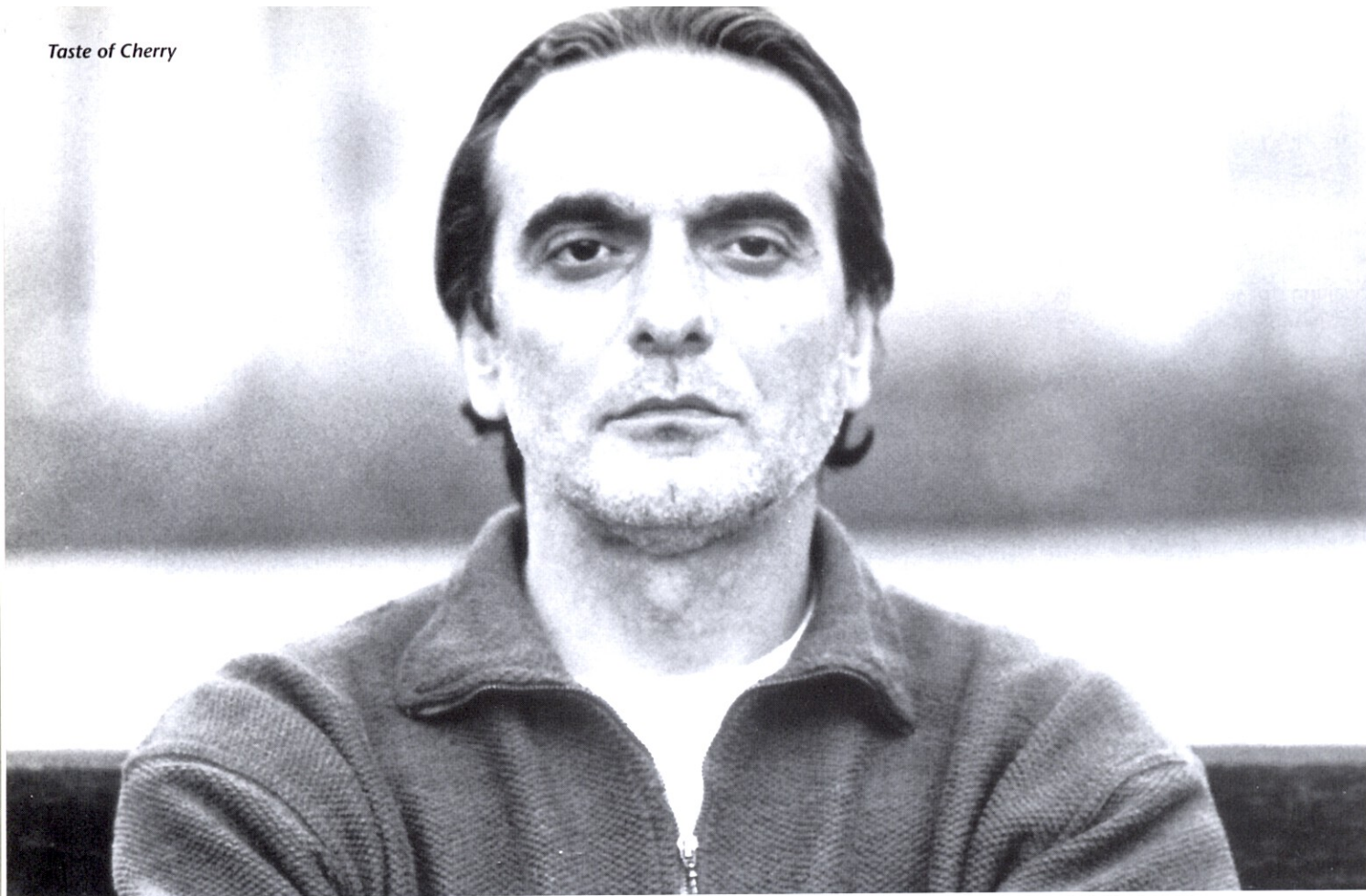
Toward the middle of *Taste of Cherry* there is scene in which Badii stops at what appears to be a construction site and steps out of his car for an aimless stroll amidst the machinery. Dumptrucks pour dirt and gravel down a hill, grates sift the finer debris from larger rocks. Eventually Badii takes a seat on the ground in a cloud of dust, and remains there until he is warned off by an off-screen worker. Since there is no narration, one may wonder about the significance of images like the play of the shadows on the digging equipment shown from what is seemingly Badii's point-of-view. The interpretive trouble with the scene is that everything important about it is happening inside Badii, and he gives the viewer no information to suggest what that may be. It is a tenuous relation because the viewer shares a most private moment with Badii, but does not know at all what he or she has shared. Badii sits in a cloud of dust with his eyes closed—thinking or waiting to die? Maybe the point is that one should not ask even if one could. That is why Kiarostami puts the viewer in this impossible situation. Maybe people cannot always say what they are thinking and feeling, because words are insufficient. It could be that just being with someone is a way to relate, if one pays attention to them. Badii does not say a word in this scene; he merely shows the viewer his life at its worst. Everything accomplished in this scene would be lost if

Kiarostami added Badii's voiceover narration. The point is that one must pay close attention, spend time and ultimately speculate rather than wait to be told.

In this way Kiarostami's style is more reflective of the ways real people act and the ways in which other real people try—or perhaps *should try*—to get to know them. For instance, no one tells the truth about his or her self every time they speak. Quite the contrary, Kiarostami observes that people fail to communicate with words more than they ever succeed. Badii interrogates his first passenger. This unlucky soldier just answers questions, as quickly as he can, trying to remain polite in a terribly and surprisingly uncomfortable situation. The dialogue begins in the superficial realm of trivialities. Even when Badii gets around to requesting the soldier's assistance in a suicide, the two end up arguing about "how easy it is to throw dirt in a hole." With passenger number two, the priest-in-training, Badii turns the conversation toward abstract arguments about the morality of suicide just as he turned his request to have the soldier bury him into a lecture on how to use a spade. Even when Bagheri turns the tables by becoming the interrogator, one's concern over his motivation is left unsatisfied, because Badii evades, ignores or mocks Bagheri's questions. "So you ate mulberries, and everything was fine," Badii scoffs. So one understands Badii based on how he relates with different people rather than based on what information he provides. One knows Badii through his interrogations and evasions.

One knows Badii also by studying his behavior: the movements of his eyes and his hands. One must read Badii's body language to see some excitement suddenly grip him lead him to rush through the museum and search for Bagheri. Suddenly he becomes anxious, and perhaps a slight smile creeps across his face as he finally gets past the ticket counter. Badii is far more animated than he has been as he tries to get Bagheri's attention through the window. He paces rapidly, sits down and gets back up again, wrings his hands and rubs them through his hair. The scene's only dialogue to this point was Badii asking for his ticket, but he has revealed so much more in this short time than he has in the rest of the film. Badii's eyes, hands, and body in this scene are more eloquent than anything *American Beauty*'s Ricky has to say about the day he videotaped the plastic bag "dancing" on the wind. It is a nice enough sentiment to talk about how beautiful the world is, as the music swells and the camera zooms in on your young, melancholy yet attractive face, but it has nothing to do with the way we experience beauty or personality on the other side of the screen.

The viewer makes discoveries about Badii by sharing his experiences. Perhaps the audience learns things about Badii at the very same time he discovers him for himself. Compare that to the way Lester gives the audience information about himself as it becomes pertinent to the plot. How much meaning, how jolting an emotion is it to be with Badii when he turns the car around after photographing the young couple? All the meaning of that action is predicated upon context; it is not mere information. To understand the viewer must be trapped in a car with Badii from the beginning. The rush of emotion and information as his hands go over one another to turn that wheel, and his



eyes dart quickly and carelessly scoping for traffic have no analogue in a movie in which every feeling or motivation is told and explained.

Life is an idea, an abstract conception, but living is a series of actions and perceptions in the world. Whatever one's morals and beliefs and desires, one's life is lived separately and often quite differently. This is why we always fail. Indeed failure is not living up to one's idea. In *American Beauty*, once a decision is made, the change has happened, as if humans live abstractly and perfectly. Once Lester decides to change his life, he instantly becomes happy, as if decision and change were the same thing. Perhaps this is how to tell a tidy story but it is simply not the function of cinema. Rather than rehash story-telling models imparted by film school, Kiarostami shows what cinema can be under the direction of a visionary.

What *American Beauty* demonstrates, albeit unwittingly, and what its critical reception shows is how much we need films like *Taste of Cherry*. *American Beauty* is what film buffs and cultural studies ideologues love: sexy people and shallow transgression that give them a chance to flaunt their emotional and intellectual superiority over the moral majority, the religious right, and other folks who "don't get it." This practice is as easy as it is dangerous. The ideology that condones the practice is insidious. Defenders of such films pat themselves on the back so much for not being offended by the suggestion of borderline pedophilia or the consumption of marijuana that they overlook the film's benign acceptance of capitalist values.

Consider that even though he hated every minute of it,

Lester Burnham's job made him enough money to buy a new car and keep him in steady supply of the most expensive pot he could find. The real obstacle he overcomes is that he finally remembers to spend his money on himself. Lester does not take a stand against anything. His crowning achievement seems to be that he is able to blackmail his boss. He does nothing radically life altering or genuinely rebellious, like question the fundamental assumption of our consuming culture; he just retires a couple of years early. Lester's American dream is not fundamentally at odds with the one that was sold to us under Eisenhower, Reagan or Bush Jr. We may enjoy different things, but the bottom line is always to have money to acquire things that will make one happy. Until that fundamental assumption is called into question, quasi-critiques of capitalism like the one Mendes offers in *American Beauty* are mere smoke. Moreover, the film takes no aesthetic risk at all. Its brand of story-telling and character development are both perfectly mainstream. If the viewer does not find the content offensive, this is a pretty easy movie to watch.

A deeper problem with *American Beauty* and the film culture from which it emerges is the value placed on cool-handed irony. For some time, American movies have been admired most when they pull the rug from beneath the viewer *just-when-you-thought-it-was-safe-to-be-happy*. Mendes and his peers seem compelled to show their audience all of life is beset by irony. For some this may be a welcome change from the "happy-ending" cliché of the blockbuster in which everything works out fine. Ultimately, however, the ironic view is little more than the other

side of the beat up old coin from the happy ending. Both are shortcut, inadequate versions of real human experience. In the case of *American Beauty*, Lester announces at the beginning that he is going to die, thus proclaiming from the outset that the film will revel in irony, because the viewer will spend the entire film waiting to see how the main character dies. Furthermore, *American Beauty*'s ultimate take on 'life is worth living' is to end the film with a dead man smiling at the image of his once happy family. Lester was finally happy again, everything worked out perfectly, except now he's dead.

This conclusion is not merely a shallow view of life, but a superficial interpretation of *American Beauty*'s most important predecessor, *Sunset Boulevard*. Wilder uses irony too, but in the service of critiquing the myth of the American Dream rather than embracing it. In fact Billy Wilder may have been the last American director to use irony in the service of something more substantial instead of treating it as a value and an insight in itself. Or perhaps our culture in general is jaded to the effects of irony because the clever marketing departments at all the big corporations have effectively neutralized irony's function as a mode of social critique over the last 50 years. Whatever the case, Americans - from the faceless mass culture consumer to cinema studies professors at top colleges and universities - have learned to esteem irony.

American movies were once, at least on occasion, hopeful enough to be inspiring, yet truthful enough not to seem like a fantasy. One recalls, for instance, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and its ambivalent final scene not of Jimmy Stewart prancing about his idyllic boy's camp with his new wife, living his boyish, idealistic dream, but of a man physically beaten, dying on his feet and crumpling in a heap of letters on the floor of congress. Or in *Rebel without a Cause*, everything is restored to the normal order after Plato is shot and Jim is reunited with his parents. "Mom, Dad, meet my girlfriend," and they exchange a knowing glance, suggesting momentarily that everything is just fine. Nicholas Ray is not content to leave it in this comfortable place (indeed the ending seems glossy to anyone not entirely jaded by Hollywood endings); the final image is of Plato's weeping caretaker. To say that the present crop of ironic cinema is more true to contemporary life than the films of Ray or Capra is to ignore much of what happens in their films. Great things happen in *Rebel* and *Smith*, but the films do not let the viewer off the hook with happy endings. If these films were made today they would seem just as foreign as *Taste of Cherry*. They aren't cynical enough or easy enough to suit the fashion of our times. They offer insight instead of escapism; they challenge rather than coddle and they hope in the places where contemporary American films are belabored with existential angst.

This is not to say that the films of Mendes and the other mainstream indys do not teach lessons; they certainly do, but one should be willing to judge the values of the different lessons. Art lessons are different from mainstream lessons. Life-affirming lessons are different from irony lessons. It is essential to my understanding of our difficulty in relating to Kiarostami's kind of filmmaking to acknowledge that mainstream filmmaking and television teach us myths that we have carelessly let settle into

our cultural consciousness. Their lessons are not "refreshing" as Kiarostami might put it. Rather, we have been battered into obedience where we should have been encouraged to make discoveries.

When Mr. Badii runs back to tell Mr. Bagheri to throw stones at him, because maybe he's awake, it isn't so much a turning point as a faint glimmer of hope. Just because a man decides not to kill himself, it does not automatically follow that he makes a fresh start to a better life. Maybe Badii has decided that he will not take as many pills, and thus improve his chances of survival. Maybe he was elated when he rushed back to talk to Bagheri, but upon reflection, Badii has decided to do it after all. Who can say what happened between his last conversation and the time he leaves his house? At any rate, he still drives out to the designated spot to lie in the hole. Maybe Badii has decided to test himself, and if he is lucky enough to live through it, he will go from there.

Taste of Cherry puts the burden of story on the imagination of the viewer; he asks that one pay attention to *Taste of Cherry* as one would respect a conversation with a real person. In mainstream movies like *American Beauty*, one is not required to think in this way, because all the gaps to be filled in and all the work is done beforehand so the audience can relax and react. Kiarostami explains, "my wish is that all viewers should not complete the film in their minds the same way, like crossword puzzles that all look the same no matter who has solved them. Even if it's 'filled out' wrong, my kind of cinema is still 'correct' or true to its original value" (FC 24). "Filling the gaps" is the viewer's subjective ideological details about motivation and "what Badii is thinking." The "original value" is the pace, the way one knows the characters, the demands on our imagination. It is from the latter that we learn the important lessons. If the viewer follows the instruction, he or she should see that this is more than just a plan for watching movies. The viewer should take that patience and imagination out of the theater, and live a deeper life. This is what Kiarostami means by "opening a window in a stuffy room." How would your life change if you started expecting the people you meet to be like Badii and Bagheri instead of Forrest Gump and every other character Tom Hanks has played in the past decade? How would our culture change? How would you change if you concentrated on knowing someone the way you have to concentrate to know Badii? Kiarostami's films are instructive in the deepest possible ways. They show us how we can know people, how we can bring our imagination to bear on reality, and how we can maintain our humanity and grow more fully human.

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Notes

- ¹ Lee is a particularly illustrative example as he was a decidedly art-house filmmaker when he was in Taiwan making meditative and thoughtful melodramas before he came to America to make action films.

IN MEMORIAM

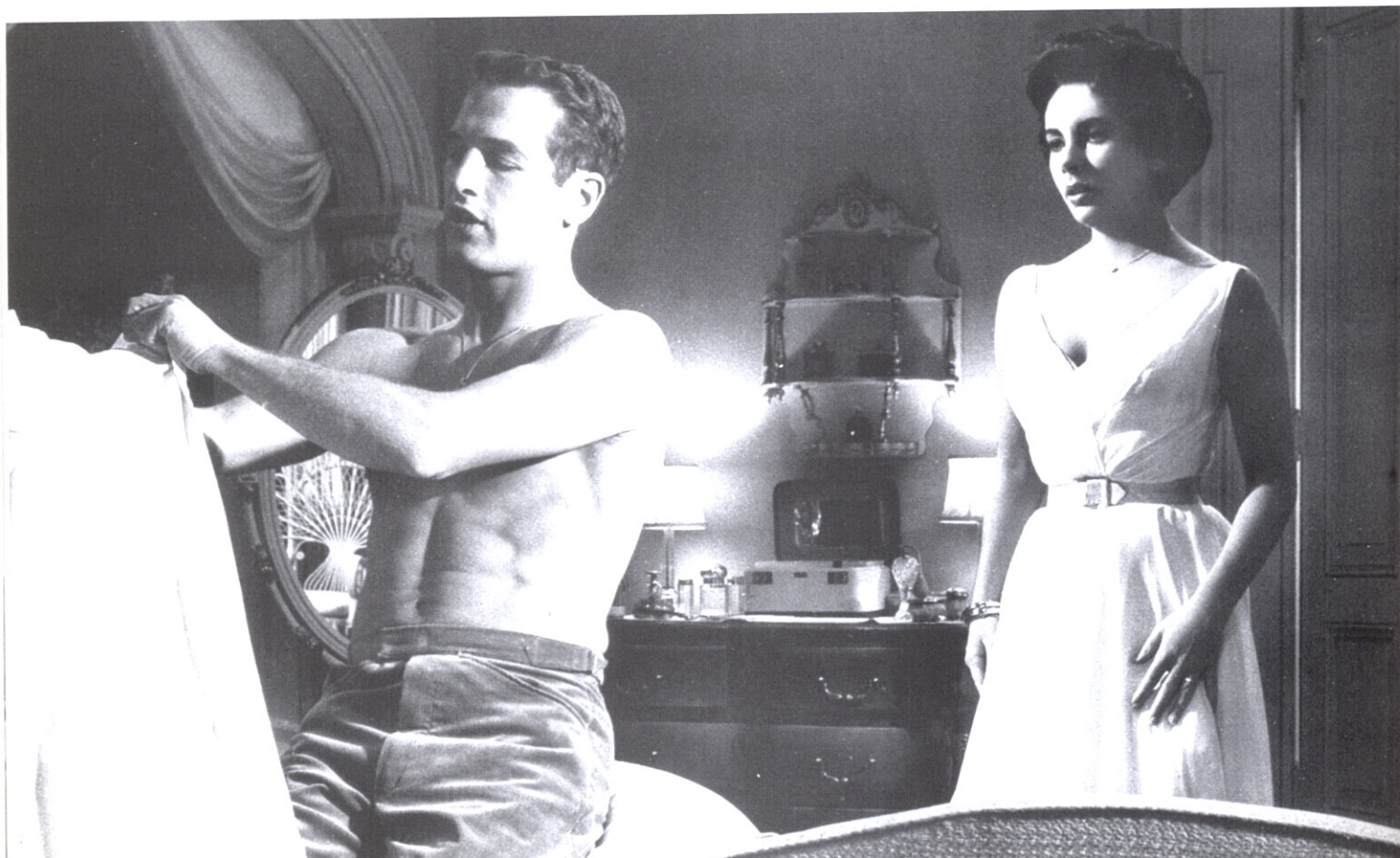
Paul Newman (1925–2008)

Paul Newman began his film career in the mid-fifties, a period of transition within the Hollywood cinema. Although in the rebel mould of Marlon Brando and James Dean who also evidenced the changes taking place both within the industry and beyond in the culture at large, Newman developed his own unique persona. Like Brando and Dean his background was diverse and included The Actors Studio and Broadway. While Brando and Dean communicated a primal physicality, intensity and a primitive emotionalism, Newman's persona, although rooted also in the physical, was marked by irony, self-deprecating humour, a cultivated sensibility and intelligence. This inflected his physical presence, producing a sexual appeal which was aestheticized and beautiful. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Newman and Elizabeth Taylor are treated as beautiful complements. (Newman's partnership with Robert Redford may be considered a male couple equivalent.) Newman was gifted with a handsome boyish face and a proportionate lovely body. He never gave the impression of being self-conscious of his beauty, which made it all the more appealing. His photogenic quality stayed with him through his long career, and he aged into a beautiful older man.

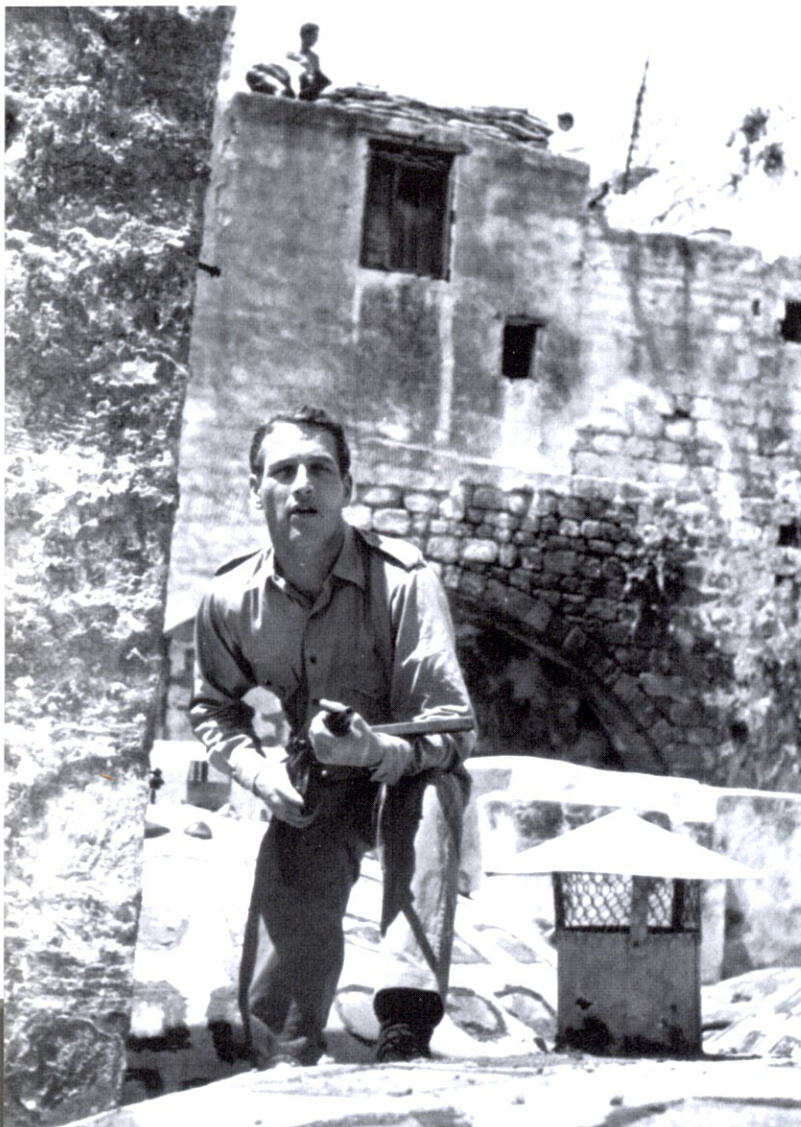
Newman's most famous roles, in *The Hustler*, *Hud* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, cast him as an outsider/bad boy. This contemporized his image and allowed him to evolve with the changes that took place in the sixties. Newman was an accomplished leading man and his oeuvre covered a range of genres and styles, from his wonderful comic performance in McCarey's *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys*, to the modern male hero figure in Preminger's *Exodus* or the character studies of *The Hustler* and *Hud*.

Although Newman worked with a number of major Hollywood directors (Hitchcock, Huston, McCarey, Preminger) he also worked for many mediocre ones who were responsible

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958)







Exodus (1960)



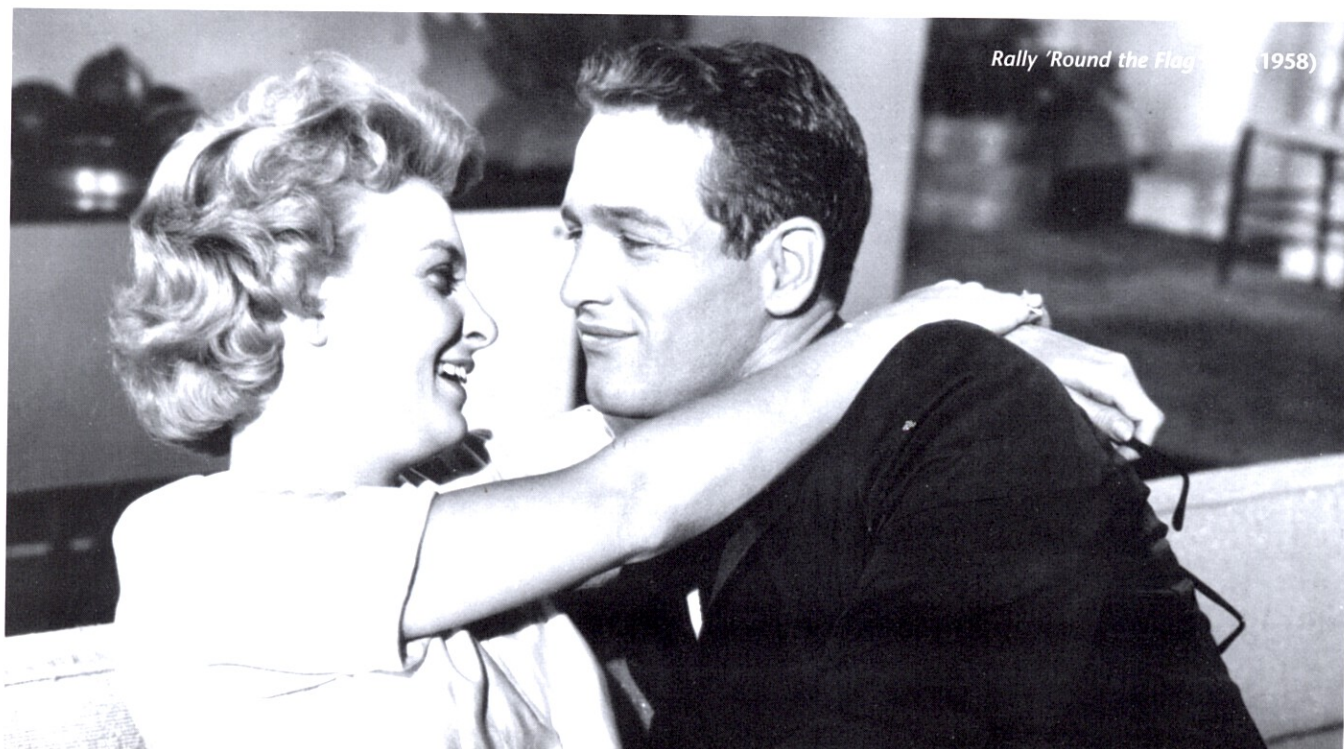
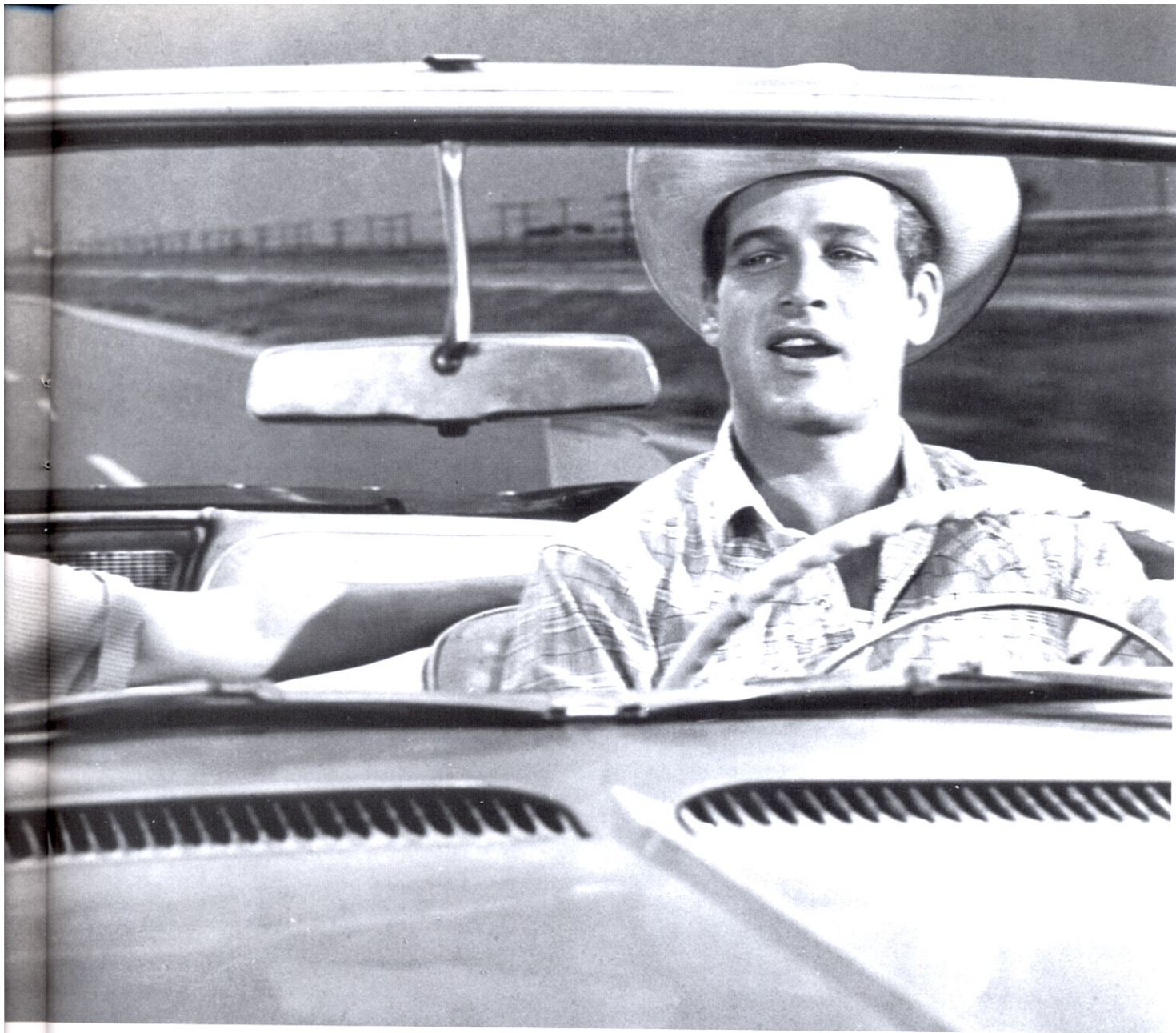
Hud (1963)

for some of his biggest commercial successes such as *Cool Hand Luke* and *The Sting*. Arguably, aside from Robert Rossen's *The Hustler*, the most substantial collaborations were with his New York East Coast contemporaries Arthur Penn, Martin Ritt and Sidney Lumet. It wasn't until later in his career that Newman won a richly deserved Academy Award for Martin Scorsese's *The Color of Money*, perhaps not his finest achievement considering *The Hustler* and *Hud*, which better showcased Newman's talents and range. The onscreen image of the male adventure and risk-taker found its real life equivalent in Newman's long term passion for race-car driving. His offscreen identity was also shaped by his humanitarian efforts.

In addition to his acting career, in which he co-starred with his wife Joanne Woodward in nine films, Newman established himself as a director of stature, on four occasions collaborating with Woodward. Their marriage was notable both for its longevity and for its conviviality.

These photos illustrate some of the contentions mentioned regarding Newman's sensuality and beauty. *Exodus* and *Hud* are representative respectively of his onscreen image as hero and anti-hero.

—FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ and RICHARD LIPPE



Rally 'Round the Flag (1958)

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL



35 Rhums: Grégoire Colin, Mati Diop, Alex Descas, Nicole Doqué

Six Films

RICHARD LIPPE

I am reviewing six films screened this year that I found engaging and appreciated seeing. There are several others, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Three Monkeys*, Jia Zhang-ke's *24 City*, Rithy Panh's *The Sea Wall* (see Florence Jacobowitz's review), that I thought were impressive works. As for disappointments, there were Amos Gitai's awkward and unsatisfying *One Day You'll Understand* and Terrence Davies's self-indulgent *Of Time and the City*.

35 Rhums (Claire Denis)

35 Rhums is a genteel and loving account of a group of working class blacks living in a French suburb. The film doesn't deal with racial tensions although one of the central black

characters, a young woman named Jo, played by Mati Diop, is romantically involved with a white man played by Grégoire Colin. (Late in the film, it is revealed that her mother was white.) Instead, it's centred on the close daughter/father relationship between Jo and Lionel/Alex Descas. In the opening scenes, Jo is waiting for Lionel to come home to his dinner after a day's work (he is a subway driver), and, upon his arrival, it is difficult to tell whether or not they are meant to be taken as a married couple. It isn't until the conclusion of the sequence that their relationship is made clear. *35 Rhums* isn't about a potentially incestuous relationship, in fact, unlike most other Denis films, there isn't anything of a controversial nature in it.

Claire Denis was present at the screening of *35 Rhums* I attended and, when asked about her reasons for making the film, she said it was intended as

homage to Yasujiro Ozu (the film is loosely based on *Late Spring*) and that Lionel was fashioned on her grandfather who reminded her of Chishu Ryu. In the context of Ozu tributes by contemporary filmmakers, *35 Rhums* makes a fitting companion piece to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Café Lumière*.

While *35 Rhums* includes a subplot involving a recently retired male co-worker of Lionel's who, when no longer having a job, discovers that his life has lost its purpose, the film concentrates on domestic life. Jo is forced into acknowledging the depth of her feelings for the Grégoire Colin character when he tells her that he is leaving to take a job abroad. In contrast to the seriousness of this relationship, Lionel shows no romantic and/or sexual interest in a mature attractive black woman, a taxi cab driver (perhaps a reference to Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*, a film on which Denis worked), who clearly is in

love with him. As these four characters live in the same apartment building, the film offers, through the depiction of their daily professional and personal lives, something of a communal existence that is, despite its positive energies, fragile and precarious.

As in *Late Spring*, the dramatic weight of the narrative resides in the recognition by Jo and Lionel that her decision to make a permanent commitment to another relationship means the end of their life together as they know it. Denis's film isn't as poignant as Ozu's and its conclusion isn't as bleak but *35 Rhums* does, nevertheless, make palatable the difficulty both characters have in letting go. The film shares with *Late Spring* sensitivity to the unspoken intimacy that a familial bond can produce and the fear of losing a loved one.

35 Rhums is consistently a graceful and elegant film. Denis, with seeming effortlessness, integrates image, music/sound so that, on numerous occasions in the film, an emotional moment is expressed through the mise-en-scene and not by what is being said by the characters. And, once again, she is working with cinematographer Agnes Godard who provides a colour palette that services the emotional tenor of the film while working within the restrictions of a naturalistic portrait of a working class environment.

Denis's screenplay remains faithful to the sentiments of Ozu's film while taking in account the vast differences in the cultural and period settings of the two works. Perhaps *35 Rhums* won't be considered one of Denis's more significant achievements because of its low-keyed tone and more conventional material, but it is an excellent film.

Four Nights with Anna (Jerzy Skolimowski)

Four Nights with Anna is Jerzy Skolimowski's first film in seventeen years and it's a compelling study of obsession, alienation and loneliness. The film, set in a small Polish village, is centred on a middle-aged man, Leon/Artur Steranko, who is in charge of a crematorium at the local hospital. Leon spends a great deal of his time spying on Anna/Kinga Preis who, a student nurse,

lives in quarters that are adjacent to Leon's house which he shares with his dying mother. Although set in the present day, *Four Nights with Anna* seems to take place in a world that belongs to the past, an expressionist environment suitable to a horror film. (That the environment and Leon's experiences are, at times, his subjective reality, seems to be implied by the film's final shot.)

Four Nights with Anna contains a masterful depiction of obsession with Leon's increasing need to be ever closer to his object of desire. To this end, Leon enters, by climbing through an open window, Anna's living space as she sleeps. Prior to the nocturnal visits, the film showed Leon, while spying on Anna, being present when she, in a daylight encounter with an unidentified man, is dragged into a shed and raped. The rape, which Anna reports to the police, is eventually what Leon is accused of doing and imprisoned for, although the film, from the information given, makes this impossible. In addition to the fact that the viewer sees Leon being a bystander to the rape, there is no suggestion, when Leon enters her room, that he wants physical contact with her. Instead, Leon's goal seems only to be in her presence, to touch objects that she uses, to watch her as

she sleeps. (Leon's voyeuristic behaviour with Anna is not unlike that of Robert Forster's with a sleeping Elizabeth Taylor in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*.)

Skolimowski creates mood through both stylistic elements and by the performance he solicits from Artur Steranko. Steranko, from his initial appearance onward, makes Leon a complex and fascinating figure whose every action seems to imply the sinister but, in fact, leads to something that reveals his timidity, gentleness or loneliness. As a character, he is a protagonist suitable to an expressionist film, to be read as victimizer (perhaps) and a victim.

Considering that Anna is but briefly more than a person observed from a distance, the lack of any other significant characters and its emphasis on the night, gives the film an oneiric quality. As with *Deep End*, Skolimowski, with this film, again illustrates his profound understanding of and empathy for the outsider, the person who lives apart, who lives in his imagination. (The entry on *Four Nights with Anna* in the TIFF catalogue aptly mentions that the film's title evokes Robert Bresson's *Four Nights of a Dreamer*.) Of the works I saw at TIFF this year, Skolimowski's film was the most impressive, disturbing and emotionally complex.



Four Nights with Anna: Kinga Preis as Anna



Happy-Go-Lucky: Eddie Marsan and Sally Hawkins

Happy-Go-Lucky (Mike Leigh)

The film's title refers to its main protagonist, Poppy/Sally Hawkins, a thirty year old teacher of young children. What makes Poppy distinctive is her positive attitude towards life and the people she encounters on a daily basis. Contrary to the impression given by the film's title, Poppy isn't merely an optimist whatever the situation. While she tries to enjoy herself whether on her own, with friends or strangers, she is, in fact, an intelligent, aware person who is in touch with her surroundings and society at large.

Happy-go-Lucky is an episodic film that features Poppy in a range of encounters, some of which being more eventful than others. For instance, Poppy, after her bicycle is stolen in the film's opening scene, decides to take driving lessons. She meets Scott/Eddie Marsan, a man about her age who prides himself in being a good driving instructor. He tells her that, as a driver, safety is the thing; it's about concentration, discipline and control. Poppy initially attempts to make light of Scott's self-seriousness while he, as the lessons progress, continues his rants that include racist thinking and a negative attitude about the future of the world. Poppy, realizing that Scott won't change, instead of dropping the lessons, becomes cynical in dealing with him. To complicate matters, Scott becomes attracted to Poppy and begins to take

an interest in her personal life. Their encounters become increasingly strained and lead to a showdown in a highly unsettling scene. (Sally Hawkins and Eddie Marsan work together beautifully and their scenes are the highlights of the film.) Scott, it seems, doesn't think being happy is possible. (In a very different context, Poppy's inability to connect is also demonstrated in a brief encounter with a homeless man. While she tries to communicate, it soon becomes evident to her that their respective worlds are too far apart to breach.)

Poppy's visit to her pregnant sister is equally relevant to the film's concerns with the reactions she solicits. Her younger sister takes the visit as an opportunity to counsel Poppy on her lifestyle, telling her that she needs to be an 'adult,' that is, get married, have children, and save her money for the future. Like Scott, although to a lesser degree, Poppy's sister professes to value the worth of human life but, in actuality, she is a fearful person who sees control and tradition as a means of self-protection.

In her professional life, Poppy comes in contact with another manifestation of what Scott and her sister embody when she sees one young boy repeatedly harassing another. In confronting the boy, Poppy learns that his anger is due to being unhappy with his home life, an environment in which he, as a child, is disempowered.

Happy-Go-Lucky balances the above-mentioned encounters with Poppy's friendships with women, particularly her flatmate and best friend, Zoey, who, while accepting Poppy as she is, tends to take a protective attitude towards her. In addition, Poppy meets Tim, an attractive and good-natured young man who also works in the school system. The film suggests that they might have a future together although the character isn't developed sufficiently to be relevant to the narrative.

Poppy's appeal is her refusal to commit to the status quo, to internalize and live with anger, fear and alienation. *Happy-Go-Lucky* is an uplifting film but its primary concern is to make us aware of the dark undertow of contemporary society.

Le Silence de Lorna (Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne)

Le Silence of Lorna is centred on a young Albanian woman who lives at the margins of society and has become involved in shady activities to economically survive. Lorna/Arta Dobroshi has married a junkie, Claudy/Jérémie Renier, to gain Belgium citizenship. Her plan is to eventually marry her Italian boyfriend and open a small cafe with him.

Early on in the film we discover that Lorna is being pressured by Fabio/Fabrizio Rongione, a gangster who sets up illegal immigration scams, to get rid of Claudy so that she can marry a Russian who needs to relocate in Europe. Fabio wants to kill Claudy whereas Lorna is trying to obtain a quick divorce from him, claiming abuse.

Lorna initially seems to have no feelings for Claudy but, as the narrative advances, she develops a regard for him and, in doing so, becomes aware of her humanity. *Le Silence de Lorna* deals with Lorna's growing realization of her usage of another person for personal gain. By the film's conclusion, she abandons her present life and is in the process of seeking a spiritual redemption.

The film's success depends on great part on Arta Dobroshi who must be in nearly every scene of the film. In *Le Silence de Lorna's* opening scenes, Lorna is seen as being a strong-willed, efficient

person who does what she needs to in order to keep Claudy under control and maintain her daily routines that include a job in a dry cleaning establishment. The film positions the viewer as an observer of Lorna's experiences, and doesn't provide information on who she is or where the narrative is going. It isn't until the storyline develops that we begin to understand her anxiousness and become involved with her and her situation. As the film doesn't technically encourage viewer identification with Lorna, our engagement with Lorna depends significantly on Dobroschi's screen presence and performance. Being a film by the Dardenne brothers, *Le Silence de Lorna* employs a 'naturalistic' aesthetic and Dobroschi's performance remains within its confines. As becomes evident in watching the film, performance is a crucial element in the works of the Dardenne brothers although given their aesthetic, its existence, while acknowledged (for example, in 1999, Emilie Dequenne won the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival for her per-

formance in *Rosetta*), tends to be subsumed under their identity as filmmakers dedicated to social realism.

Arta Dobroschi gives a good performance but her greatest strength is her screen presence. Such factors as her facial features and her body language contribute to making Dobroschi a compelling presence whatever she does (or doesn't do) onscreen. Clearly, the Dardenne brothers are fully conscious of the impact of Dobroschi's presence and enhance it through her appearance. More specifically, this can be seen in the color choices made in the clothing she wears. For example, Dobroschi, with her fair skin, black hair and dark eyes, is seen wearing, early on in the film, an outfit that includes a red sweater under her wine red jacket. (These colors also function to reinforce Lorna's strong sense of determination.)

Le Silence de Lorna, structurally and thematically, is in keeping with the previous Dardenne films I have seen. This doesn't lessen its effectiveness in offering a disturbing portrait of contempo-

rary society and the way in which people are forced to choose between survival and self-respect.

Miracle at St. Anna (Spike Lee)

The most striking aspect of Spike Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna* is its elaborate narrative structure that, in addition to a present-past-present framing device, includes numerous flashbacks and, in settings, international locations. The film's screenplay is by James McBride who adapted his own novel. Perhaps the book version functioned as a fluid text but, when translated to film, it becomes somewhat cumbersome, calling attention to the narrative's elaborate set of storytelling conventions and its numerous characters and situations.

Miracle of St. Anna deals with WW II and the army's all black 92nd Division, known as the Buffalo Soldiers. The film's war time action takes place in Tuscany, 1944, and is centred on several issues: the interactions of four of the division's soldiers, each diverse in identity; the racial tensions that erupt when the black

Miracle at St. Anna: Omar Benson Milles and Matteo Sciabordi





\$5 a Day: Christopher Walken as Nat

soldiers are forced to deal with higher commanding white officers; the contacts that occur between the black soldiers and the Italians living in a rural village.

Lee's film is highly ambitious in its agenda and *Miracle at St. Anna* runs 166 minutes. Its epic nature is acknowledged indirectly in the film's present day opening scene, taking place in 1983; we see an elderly black man watching a television broadcast of *The Longest Day* that features a rugged John Wayne giving orders to his men. Most likely, the film and the clip used are Lee's way of commenting on Hollywood war films: in their writing of American history, the war was fought solely by white hero figures. Yet, in its scale and socially conscious concerns, Lee's epic film is in the liberal tradition of the late '50s and '60s Hollywood cinema which, at its most impressive, was exemplified by Otto Preminger with works such as *Exodus*.

From another perspective, *Miracle at St. Anna*'s Italian footage functions as a tribute to the Italian neo-realist cinema and, in particular, to Roberto Rossellini's *Open City*. Lee, in dealing with WW II, also connects war (fascism/racism, Germany/white America) and religion.

In Lee's film, the miracle involves the relationship between a black soldier, played by Omar Benson Miller, who has a strong belief in the power of religion and a young Italian boy, played by Matteo Scibordi, who is a Catholic, but, also, like the black soldier, is a believer in omens and magic. Their story is at the heart of the film and ties together, somewhat awkwardly, the bond the film constructs between blacks and whites.

Miracle at St. Anna is Lee's first film that employs extensive out-of-door shooting and its battle scenes are extremely well-staged and shot. Although not a totally successful work, when dealing with the Benson Miller and Scibordi characters (both actors give excellent performances) and in depicting the experiences of black soldiers in the Italian village, the film is very good.

***\$5 a Day* (Nigel Cole)**

\$5 a Day is a comedy-drama 'road movie' in which Christopher Walken plays Nat, a small-time hustler who, upon finding out that he is dying, attempts to repair his damaged relationship with his son, Flynn/Alessandro

Nivola. Some years earlier Flynn spent time in jail because one of Nat's schemes went wrong and he, not his father, was the one prosecuted. Nat, re-enters his son's life, tells him that he is ill and asks Flynn to accompany him on a cross country trip so that he can get medical help.

\$5 a Day is, first and foremost, a vehicle for Walken. The film provides Walken with a role that isn't typical of his latter-day work that has him playing supporting roles in which he comes across as being either weird and/or grotesque. (Even in *Hairspray*, his characterization of the heroine's father is more unsettling than comforting and/or attractive.) While he makes Nat alternatively appealing, idiosyncratic and exasperating, he sufficiently humanizes the characterization to make us care for Nat and about his scheme to unite with his son. In addition, Nivola makes Flynn a strong counter-balance to Walken's Nat, conveying the character's ambivalent feelings towards his father and resisting Nat's not-so-subtle attempts at manipulation. And, like Walken, Nivola, when he wants, has good looks and charm to spare.

On their way across country the two men visit Dolores/Sharon Stone, who also hustles. In addition to being at one time Nat's protégé and possibly his lover, she was Flynn's babysitter. Stone, on her first appearance, is a bit startling, wearing a bikini and having a hairdo and make up that borderline on the overwhelming. But as Dolores begins to relate to the men, she becomes a more humanized figure and, at their parting, her farewell (merely a smile) is eloquently touching. In a small role (it can be seen as a companion piece to her role in Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*), Stone takes a part that could have been played as a caricature and creates a character of substance.

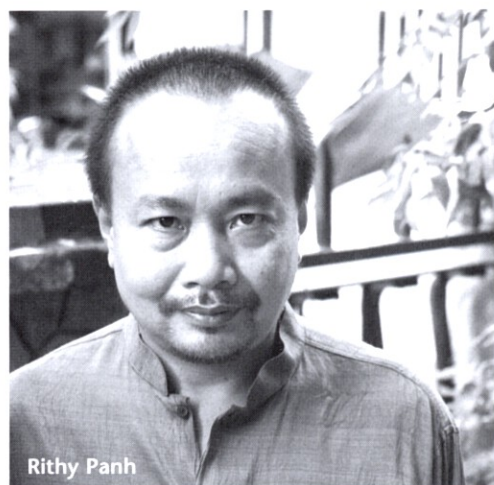
\$5 a Day is a more sophisticated work than its formulaic premise would suggest. Its pleasures reside in its intelligent performances, good writing, solid direction and a slightly off-beat nature. As a road movie, its trajectory is predictable but the film is never sentimental.

Un barrage contre le Pacifique/ The Sea Wall

FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Rithy Panh's *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* / *The Sea Wall* was screened as part of the Special Presentations section at this year's festival, coming and going with surprisingly little attention or press. It features a very strong cast including Isabelle Huppert as the Mother, Gaspard Ulliel as her son Joseph, Astrid Berges-Frisbey as her daughter Suzanne and, in supporting but significant roles, Randal Douc as the Chinese businessman M. Jo and the family servant, the Corporal, (whose name is not listed in the abbreviated cast list in the press kit) and is intelligently directed by Rithy Panh. The film

is based on Marguerite Duras' semi-autobiographical novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* published in 1950. Generically the film draws from the melodrama and in some ways has the feel of an historical epic as it dramatizes the oppression resulting from French colonialist rule in French Indochina in 1931. It is also a family melodrama as it is about familial relationships. *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is, however, far from conventional; it evidences a modernist, almost art house sensibility in its intellectual treatment of the subject matter and characterization, which invites an analytical involvement on the part of the



Rithy Panh





audience, producing an interpretation which suits Duras' narrative.

The film concerns the Mother's losing struggle to hold on to a concession of land she has purchased in French Indochina. She is a widow who has invested all her savings in this land which, although productive, is regularly flooded by sea water, resulting in the loss of her crops. The Mother holds the colonial administration responsible for the family's current state of impoverish-

ment as they sold her the right to work the concession, knowing it was a venture certain to fail. They are also guaranteed the eventual expropriation of the land as the contract stipulates that if the fields are not cultivated they can be repossessed. The Mother realizes she has been exploited by the ruling class of white French colonialists, a group from which she is alienated by her poverty and lack of power. The Mother (who is never identified by name, only by her

position in the family) senses that her identity, both as a farmer and as the head of the family, is threatened; her children have grown up and will soon wish to leave her, a situation exacerbated by the tenuous hold she has on her property which is slipping away. She is succumbing to illness, which seems to be a physical manifestation of her feelings of powerlessness and increasing desperation to hold on to her land and her identity. As the Mother's savings

dwindle she tries securing a mortgage from the bank but is refused. (It is only when the bank manager notices her relationship with a wealthy Chinese businessman M. Jo that he reconsiders extending her loan.) Ever resourceful, the Mother comes up with a scheme to build a wall to keep the ocean from flooding her land. As fantastic as the idea seems to be, she convinces the indigenous people to aid her, drawing on their shared contempt for the land registry office and the colonialists who exploit them all. The wall, however precarious and doomed to fail, becomes a gesture of protest against an exploitive class and colonial system that is nurtured by greed and injustice.

Panh's film focuses on the politics underlying Duras' fictional narrative that draws heavily from her memoirs. He underplays the details of the sexual relationships that the siblings experience and concentrates on the melodramatic aspects of the story—the struggle of the weak against the oppressors in French Indochina, an inequality compounded by gender and class. The Mother understands the handicap of her gender which may account for her favouring her son Joseph over Suzanne. Joseph is characterized by his abundant machismo; he is described by Suzanne as being wild and handsome, and is impetuous and courageous. The children who live on the property are fascinated by his ability to fix a car or skin a carcass; their admiration is illustrated in shots like the one which begins with the camera capturing the children's faces and then moving laterally ending on Joseph at work, the object of their transfixed gaze. Joseph's response to the officials from the land registry office is to chase them off the property by shooting at them. The Mother focuses her concerns on Joseph, as he is the hunter/labourer who takes charge of the physical necessities of running the farm. She worries that Joseph endangers himself on his nocturnal hunts, and may one day leave and never return. When he finally does leave to join his lover in the city, she predicts that he will leave his lover as well, as she, the Mother, is the only one who could hold him for an

extended time. Her distress is so extreme that Suzanne tells her, "It's not like he's dead", but it is a death sentence to the Mother. She claims "there is no reason to be here anymore... He should have shot me dead before he left..." (connecting herself to the exhausted work horse he pities and shoots at the start of the film). The Mother wears the flawed diamond ring Joseph returns to her on a chain around her neck until she nears her death, an emblem of what she perceives to be a union that is sacrosanct.

Suzanne notices her mother's favouritism and asks at one point, "Don't you care if I eat?" Suzanne is judged by her exchange value, and is considered almost as a form of collateral—whether she can snare a suitor like M. Jo, a wealthy businessman who might then bring financial support and security. Suzanne repeats her mother's declaration, that her purity is her greatest asset. The moments when the Mother explodes and abuses her verbally or with blows is when she fears that Suzanne has compromised and diminished her potential value by selling herself to M. Jo for a phonograph, or has bartered an excursion to the city in exchange for a diamond ring. The Mother encourages M. Jo's passion for Suzanne and pressures him to consider marriage, regardless of the firmly ingrained social prejudice against couples of mixed race. In many respects Joseph shares his mother's disdain and frustration regarding the losing battle to hold on to the rice fields and her willingness to try whatever is necessary to raise the money to survive. Suzanne is less angry than her mother and brother and is more sensitive; she worries about her mother's diminished health and is troubled by a comment M. Jo has made to her, that the family's tactics are immoral, to which Joseph accedes, unperturbed, "We are definitely immoral". Despite all this Suzanne inherits a great deal from her mother—her love for the fields, her skills at writing and spelling as well as her quasi-incestuous love for Joseph and the life force that he represents.

Un barrage contre le Pacifique aligns

the Mother's struggles to hold on to the concession she has legally purchased to the suffering of the local population who are destitute and succumbing to disease. The mother's awareness of their plight is expressed in scenes like the one where she sees and questions the treatment of the chained prisoners' dire conditions and tries to offer them water to drink, or when she is called upon to help a child sick with dengue fever. The Mother's profound connection to the land (in contrast to the colonialists whose interests are purely exploitive and self-serving) is emphasized in shots like the one where she stands alone in the rice field caressing the stalks, or in repeated shots of her planting or securing plants. Suzanne too understands that crops are living things that have a 'soul', indicated in the shot of her in the rice field towards the end of the film, replicating her mother's gestures, or when she is shown in the latter part of the film wearing a scarf tied around her head in the tradition of the local women. This politicized alliance is subtly understated and complicated by the family's position as outsiders, as French speaking white colonists who can indulge in sardonic humour at the dinner table regarding their hope that they too, one day, will be rich and will crush the poor without giving a damn"; the moment is commented upon by the close-up of the maggots that fall onto the dinner table from the roof that is in a state of disrepair. Even the Corporal's position of devoted employee to the family is challenged one day when he picks up Joseph's rifle and momentarily points it at him, underlying the double edge of the family's status as both allies and outsiders. Ultimately the Mother's increasingly politicized consciousness linking gender, class and colonialist exploitation is expressed in the second letter she writes to the registry office bureaucrats regarding the futility of her sacrifices for the land in which she has invested so heavily and their indifference to her plight. She connects this explicitly to the social conditions of the locals and the fact that their sufferings of illness and death are welcomed by the colonialists as it hastens and ensures the

eventual appropriation of their land. The Mother finishes her letter with a curse, claiming that when her children are gone and she is alone (a sign of her complete defeat), she will enjoy seeing their bodies eaten by dogs. Her powerlessness is emphasized by a cut to M. Jo, patiently waiting for her demise so that he can take over her verdant property, crushing a crab that crawls by. (The Mother's comment when she hears that the sea wall has collapsed, "Even the crabs are against me", connects her to this moment.)

The family's affinity with the locals is substantiated and strengthened by their complex relationship with the Corporal. Suzanne's appreciation of the Corporal's concern for the family and his constancy is expressed in a quiet moment when she thanks him, in his native tongue, for inquiring if she would care for dinner one evening when she is alone, writing. Regretting not having acted more forcefully with regards to the registry office, the Mother remarks to Suzanne "I wish Joseph would have killed them... more than his return", to which Suzanne responds, "Maybe the Corporal's children will do it." Following the Mother's funeral, Joseph presents the Corporal with the rifle as a gift (clearly crossing a line by arming a local). He tells him directly that he should "protect what needs protecting; this is what Mother would want" thus explicitly instructing him, in his mother's name, to fight against his oppression by the white colonialist regime. Despite the fact that the Mother dies and succumbs to a losing battle (she passes the flawed diamond on to Suzanne and advises her to go far away, thus acknowledging defeat) she fights her victimhood and survives in the legacy of the fields that to this day are named in her memory, the fields of the white woman. As in the tradition of the genre, the system overwhelms but the gesture of protest is celebrated.

The casting of Isabelle Huppert as the Mother is particularly felicitous to the meaning of the film. Huppert's presence sexualizes the Mother, underscoring the tensions between her and her

physically beautiful children. It also underlines the contradictions of family life as the three live in relative isolation and in closes quarters; the boundaries between social and familial roles become blurred and ill defined, particularly in the way Joseph doubles as a husband/partner to the Mother, and a friend/love object for Suzanne. Huppert plays the Mother as a woman who is empowered by her intelligence and willpower, and her understanding of how the system works. She knows that men (the registry officers, M. Jo) are opportunists and will take what they can and she responds in kind. The film doesn't present her character with psychological depth; for example, one is given little information about her past or what she really thinks, which is typical of many of the characters Huppert has played (drawing from her tendency towards a minimalist performance style and a modernist conception of characterization perfected in her great collaborations with Claude Chabrol. The effect of this is to use the individual to point to the broader social context). Instead, meaning is communicated in the smallest of gestures, a handling of a pocket watch or a letter, a manner of striding with a walking stick, or in her sardonic delivery of some of the Mother's almost absurd comments; when she notes the spelling errors in Joseph's letter that she is thrilled to receive she states, as a former schoolteacher, she would have preferred had he died. This line is not an easy one to deliver successfully and Huppert manages to blend an acerbic tone with a deeply felt affection.

Huppert often plays a character challenging the limitations a society places on women, refusing to be a victim; she often communicates a fierce persistence and will, pursuing her needs and desires at all cost. Here she galvanizes an oppressed community to support her utopian dream of holding back the ocean and only gives up when she is defeated by a social world that refuses to acknowledge her. The Mother is a character who is both dignified and touched by madness, and the film uses her as a marker to comment on the

inequities she bravely tries to correct. Huppert realizes these difficult demands and her persona and star image modernizes and contemporizes the source material, which is the director's intention, as he ends the film with a shot of present day Cambodia, and the legacy and results of the Mother's tenacious struggles.

Panh's direction compliments the minimalism and modernity of Huppert's performance style. Meaning is communicated in small compressed moments, like the remarkable one where M. Jo's masochistic/obsessive desire to possess Suzanne, and her thrill of being indulged, is expressed in the scene where he is carefully painting her toenails red with the latest colour imported from Paris. Panh's sophisticated attention to *mise-en-scène*, lighting and costumes, colour and tone, is evident throughout. Panh heightens the sexual presence of Joseph/ Gaspard Ulliel, by shooting him in a style reminiscent of 30's Hollywood glamour photography. Mood is established in shots of great beauty—a cloudy sky, a dock at dawn, the sunlit river, a field of undulating rice plants in various shades of green. When shooting in the confined space of the family bungalow, he is careful often to include the surrounding natural world outside, which expresses why the family puts up with the almost primitive simplicity of the home, precisely because of the remarkable beauty of the country that surrounds it. Chez Bart, the restaurant and meeting place of the white privileged colonialists (and occasional intruders like the wealthy M. Jo) seems exactly opposite—it is confined to the interior social world of clothing, pretense, and being seen, cut off from the surroundings.

It is wonderful that the film ends with Susan replacing her mother in the fields, drawing the same pleasure from standing on the land in which so much energy has been invested. It rethinks the defeatism often inherent in the melodrama, which anchors its narratives in an unjust world, and emphasizes instead the validity and value of protest, no matter how great are the odds against winning.

TIFF '08 and *Liverpool*

SUSAN MORRISON

This year's Toronto International Film Festival seemed to me to be less well-run than in previous years. Whether it was the depressing experience of trying to buy tickets for the public screenings and discovering that a contribution of \$250 could get me to the head of the line (whatever happened to democracy?), or the mind-numbing wait of two and a half hours in the ticket pickup line on the last day of summer vacation, or again, the experience of having an afternoon film screening rescheduled at the last minute to Sunday morning which resulted in there being about 10 people in the audience for the poor filmmaker who had traveled all the way from

mainland China for this, the fact is that there seemed to be a deterioration in the way in which things were being handled at TIFF 08, and it was the public who suffered.

On the other hand, the films that I managed to see, were for the most part quite decent. This was a pretty low-key festival, with not a lot of buzz generated for any particular film. One of the perks of a press pass is that there are 2 weeks of press screenings prior to the opening of the festival, and as a film buff with a full-time job and a limited capacity to watch more than 2 films per day, this enables me to see up to 30 out of a

potential 300 or so. Once the festival starts, and I'm back at work, I rely on purchased public tickets because that way I can make sure I get to see specific films. Up to a few years ago, most of my tickets were dedicated to East Asian cinemas...films from Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and to a lesser degree, South Korea. Unfortunately for me, what has happened over the course of the last few years is that fewer and fewer of these films are being brought in for the festival. In 2002, for example, there were 33 East Asian feature length fiction films screened at TIFF; in 2008, there were only 17.

So this year I found myself asking around for recommendations for other films, which is how I came to select *Liverpool*, an Argentinian film that I had not heard of whose director, Lisandro Alonso, was unknown to me. While another film that I saw at TIFF, Terence





Davies *Of Time and the City* was (a meditative autobiographical documentary) about the English city of Liverpool, Alonso's film is most emphatically not. *Liverpool* has nothing to do with Liverpool...the only explanation of the quizzical choice of title comes close to the end of the film where it serves as a kind of self-reflexive punch line. However, after a month-long feast of international films, it was this film that made the biggest impression on me.

The film itself is just under 90 minutes in length, its narrative a seemingly simple picaresque trajectory that follows Farrel, a somewhat disheveled 40ish sailor, whom we first see on board a freighter, where very tight shots of the interior rooms and corridors intersperse with traveling shots following our protagonist as he moves through these claustrophobic spaces. Alone in his

cabin, as well as when he's around others, it becomes apparent that Farrel prefers his solitude and his vodka bottle to human contact. The 'action' begins when Farrel asks his captain for a shore leave when they arrive at Ushuaia, a seaport located on the island of Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost tip of Argentina. His explanation is that he wants to visit his mother who lives inland, and whom he hasn't seen in 20 years. In fact, he doesn't know whether she is still alive. The captain gives him a few days only, as the ship is on schedule to depart then. Farrel leaves the ship, spends a night or so in the city and then manages to hitch a ride on a logging truck that travels inland where it eventually drops him off in what looks like the middle of nowhere. Continuing his journey on foot, he leaves the road and what civilization there is behind as

he heads off through the snow-covered terrain, crunching across frozen fields and through barren forests. At last, he arrives at a village of a few huts dominated by a sawmill, where he is noticed but ignored by an older man walking in the snow. Farrel asks another man he comes upon where he can get something to eat and is directed towards a canteen. There, as he eats and watches in silence, a young woman who appears to be of limited mental capacity, enters, gets some food to take out, and departs. Farrel later is shown spying through a window of one of the huts; it is the young woman's... her name is Analia... and it turns out she lives with his mother who is bedridden. When he eventually enters the house, Farrel sits down beside his mother who is apparently senile and does not recognize him. Farrel meets the old man from the earli-

er scene, whom we discover is actually Farrel's father, who asks why he returned after such a long absence and informs him that Analia was born after he left. Shortly after this, Farrel packs up his vodka and departs for the ship, but first seeks out Analia and gives her a token for remembrance.

Liverpool in its production and narrative resembles a neo-realist film. Alonso affirmed this in explaining its genesis at the Q and A following the TIFF 08 screening. He revealed that his method of working was to first find the location, live there for a period of time to familiarize and acquaint himself with the environment and the people, "to observe without making judgement", and then to draft a script; in the case of *Liverpool*, of 20 pages in length ("I don't like to work too much," he joked to the audience). All the parts were played by non-actors, many of them the actual inhabitants of the village. Juan Fernandez, who plays the lead role of Farrel, previously held a job as a snow remover on the highways of Tierra del Fuego. Alonso stated that his direction consisted of his warning them not to look at the camera, and in fact, exhorting them not to act or to try to express anything, just to be honest.

Stylistically, however, the film does some really interesting things that contradict the 'verismo' and break open the artifice of filmmaking as political position. There are several examples of Alonso's interest in neo-formalist disjuncture hiding behind the neo-realist veneer. From the start of the film, the opening credit sequence is quite surprising. The screen is black, the text is red, the letters are large and fill the entire screen in such a way that it's surprisingly difficult to read them. Added to this, the usual differentiation in size and style of letters between the role performed and the individual who performed it was barely if at all perceptible and this, tied in with a reordering or disordering of the credit list conventions, heralded a subtly disorienting approach.

This strategy of disorientation continues in at least one aspect of the film's editing: it uses a jarring editing practice of cutting abruptly from dark interiors to brilliant exteriors.

A quite remarkable feature of this film is the fact that, as far as I can recall, there were few if any POV shots used in the entire film. This unconventional conceit became evident near the beginning of the film, when Farrel is in Ushuaia, eating in a restaurant/strip joint. The scene starts with a shot of two strippers, seen from the rear, leaning on the bar, talking. The camera slowly pans to the right, across the bar and through the room to rest on Farrel, who is sitting at a table facing the camera. He drinks and eats and watches. The camera, however, does not give us a POV shot of what he is so intently looking at (presumably the strippers): it holds on his face as he observes them, depriving us of being able to join him in looking. Film grammar conventions use the POV shot to place the viewer into the film as we become the character we are watching; we see through their eyes. As a filmic strategy, the absence of the POV shot makes us aware that we are missing out on something; that we can not participate in the visual pleasure that Farrel is obtaining from his looking.

However, we are also thus being forced out of the film frame, into a conscious recognition that we are not being allowed to be participants in this film-world but must remain as distanced observers. So it's not just that the conventional filmic grammar of being inserted into the filmworld has become foregrounded. The effect is quite distancing in the Brechtian sense; we want something we can't have and are made self-consciously aware of it.

A dominant motif of *Liverpool* is the frozen Patagonian landscape, an icy white terrain that is reflected in the port city with its barren streets and white ships, the great stretches of snow covered fields Farrel traverses in search of the village, and once he arrives, in the absence of warmth and interconnectedness among the humans who inhabit it. Throughout the film, Farrel remains an observer of the world around him, as we are observers of the diegetic world he inhabits. He is emphatically an observer, not a participant. He barely communicates with other people, and relies on an omnipresent bottle of vodka for companionship. As there is little dia-

logue to fill us in on what Farrel is thinking or what his plans are, we are at the mercy of the visuals in order to fill in the narrative details. And while the visuals are quite something - highly formalist in a Bressonian way, slow, with a mostly static camera and little camera or lens movement - they nevertheless fail to supplement the narrative by providing us with an explanation as to who Farrel is, why he left, and what the connection is between him and Analia.¹ Sitting there in the dark of the theatre, we the viewers are forced back on ourselves to try to find meaning in the minimalist narrative. And yet, even without a predictable plot or a fully-fleshed out one, the film is surprisingly humanistic. Set in the coldest of habitable locations, amongst people whose lives are circumscribed by their meager existence and whose interior lives are absent from the film's exposition, *Liverpool* nonetheless exposes us to difference and shows us that there are commonalities to be found in the mere fact that we are all human.

"I think that simply filming someone is the best way to demonstrate what I think about the human being—about his lack of communication, his isolation, and his incomprehension about himself and the world. I think that, in the end, a human being is always alone in each decision he makes, although it is true that his family, his friends, and his surroundings contribute to those decisions."

—Lisandro Alonso,
(Cinema Scope 36)

Notes

- 1 While watching *Liverpool*, I assumed that she was his sister, as she lived with his parents and took care of them. However, as I was researching the film, I was shocked to discover that the majority of writers had concluded that Analia was his daughter. As far as I can recall, there was no mention or even indication of a former girl friend that would have indicated the connection. Given the lack of communication generally between the inhabitants of the village and Farrel and his family in particular, I'm not sure it actually makes a difference. Nonetheless, in an interview published in a recent issue of *Cinema Scope*, Alonso (conclusively?) refers to Analia as Farrel's daughter.

Performance, Realism and Melodrama

SCOTT FORSYTH

Toronto's Festival always provides a buffet of enticing choices for spectatorship of films from all over the world. Critics can follow favourite directors, genres or national cinemas; or selection of films can be random—what fits in the schedule or what films are likely to never surface theatrically again. Avoiding the growing flock of undistinguished Hollywood openings is easy because the Festival still fulfills a mandate to bring films from all over the world, unlimited by commercial considerations. Looking back at the more than 20 films I saw this year, I realize some films faded instantly, others have remained in my mind, prompting further reflection, even another viewing if possible.

Most of the films I found impressive stand within contemporary strands of the great traditions of cinematic realism; and my attention was particularly drawn to the acting styles and performances in many of these films. Acting is one of the

least analyzed of the aspects of cinema, even as our casual criticism so often refers to it. Realism, and the naturalist acting style most associated with it, is still often derided by film academics. But a simple evaluative polarity with realism subordinated to modernism and the avant-garde has not proven historically resilient. Realism and modernism, as styles and movements, have always been entwined and social realism clearly remains a vibrant, often radical, tradition in most countries. In fact, these films provided a fascinating snapshot of the historic lineage, its permutations, international migrations and contemporary ambitions.

Rachel Getting Married and *Happy-Go-Lucky* were both avidly promoted for the outstanding lead performances. Anne Hathaway's Kym, a sardonically miserable, precariously recovering drug addict crashing through the weekend of her sister's almost idyllic nuptials, is

quite a contrast to Sally Hawkins' irrepressibly positive Polly, just determinedly living a few days of her everyday life. But each memorable performance dominates the film and each film is organized around the intensity of that performance. Both films have since opened, although not widely, to critical and considerable, if modest, commercial success, again led by critics' acclaim and multiple award nominations for the leading actors.

Rachel is an interesting example of a resilient *genus* of American films—a Hollywood director apparently responding to developments in European art cinema. Director Jonathan Demme's new film recalls some of the films of the DOGME 95 movement; this manifesto promoted a stripped-bare realism encompassing acting, camera and sound work, editing and narrative, posed against Hollywood spectacle. While most of the films associated with DOGME, such as Lars Von Trier's provocative work, go far beyond this aesthetic, the film that seems most apposite for Demme is Thomas Vinterburg's *The Celebration*. That film is similarly organized with a family gathering disrupted and galvanized by painful revelations. The work of other celebrated European realists such as Mike Leigh,



Rachel Getting Married



Happy-Go-Lucky

Ken Loach and the Dardennes brothers doubtless provided inspiration as well. At the same time, Demme owes a great deal to the work of Robert Altman, another Hollywood 'art' cineaste, perhaps a film such as *The Wedding*, although without the uncomfortably acerbic humour or intricately multiple story lines. We can also see, in *Rachel's* intense roving hand-held cameras and intrusively revelatory dramatic structure, the impact of decades of American reality television, older *verité* documentaries or even parodies of such forms like *The Office*. Scandalous talk shows like *Jerry Springer* probably prepare us, with their serial confessionals and pleas for healing and redemption, for Kym's almost lost weekend.

Demme emphasized in interviews the long work-shopping with the cast, the emphasis on ensemble and the incorporation of a feeling of improvisation—all part of the European inspirations. However, Hathaway's lead performance dominates the film, the roving camera always finds and privileges her intense apologies, eruptions and confessions. Indeed, these moments of Acting punctuate and disrupt both the wedding as narrative and the blander, not very dramatic, documentary of this huge party, with family and guests eating, playing music, congratulating each other, being

happy. Partly, this is a function of melodrama. While often a colloquial term, derisively posed against realism, melodrama has always been historically related to realism—think of Dickens, Flaubert or Balzac—and here the veracity of realist performance is organized and displayed by the high points of melodrama—sudden death, tortuous family rivalry and love, madness and disease, terrible coincidence and fateful repetition.

In Hollywood tradition, performances like Hathaway's are always connected to the Method—elaborate preparation, intense inhabitation of roles, heightened psychological posturing for both the actor and the character. Of course, this reigning 'serious' acting migrated from the avant-garde theatres of Moscow and Berlin to New York and on to Hollywood—the Group Theatre, the Actors' Studio. Again, even if changed and perhaps de-politicized, this is the complex interpenetration of Hollywood and European art.

It is also useful to observe how much realism is always about the representation of class. Here, in contrast to the 'lower' classes of classic social realism, we watch a class fraction—in the somewhat mystifying terminology of North American class discourse—the upper middle class of successful professionals,

akin to the petit-bourgeoisie of European and Marxist nomenclature. This is, we should recognize, the most familiarly represented slice of American class reality—the affluent and attractive characters and homes of American television drama, sitcom and advertisements. This constant attention naturalizes the corresponding representational disappearance of the American working class from culture, observed by numerous scholarly commentators, most notably Stanley Aronowitz and David James. It is the historical counter-attack to what cultural historian Michael Denning called the labouring of American culture, powered by the leftist Popular Front, that moved the representation of the ethnic American working class into the Hollywood mainstream in the thirties and forties. That was often associated with acting and eventually the Method, of course—from Garfield and Brando to Pacino and De Niro. Far from that explosive lineage, much of the visual pleasure of Demme's film is just from the exploration of the huge beautiful house, the choreographed movement of beautiful young people, strikingly, and unproblematically, multi-racial, with an unusual number of musicians practicing charmingly diverse kinds of music. As usual, the soft realism of Hollywood announces what is currently 'modern',



albeit in a superficial fashion. Hathaway/Kym's performance, and her life's misery and failure, intrudes into this class utopia, but is also framed and contained by it. While the film does not challenge the class nature of what is portrayed, it does eschew melodramatic resolution. No villains are vanquished, no good rewarded, the wedding weekend concludes with a sad measure of having gotten through, without redemption, just damaged endurance.

The vitality of social realism was evident in films from all over the world. The Dardennes brothers' *Le silence de Lorna* is discussed elsewhere in this section. *Hooked*, from the increasingly celebrated cohort of young Romanian filmmakers, offered a disturbing portrayal of a kind of triangle of two lovers and a prostitute. Three superb performances are organized by an almost painful hand-held camera, finally like another character; here we seem to be beyond realism, uncertain of just what is, or has, happened. *Better Things*, from the UK, explores a rural world of drugs, teen alienation and family anomie. Here, the overlapping narratives unfold with a distanced painterly composition that makes the sadness even greater. Gritty social realism remains the prevailing Canadian genre and there were numer-

ous examples; *Down to the Dirt* from Newfoundland offered a literally dirty example. Organized by the "hero"/poet's annoying, aggrandizing narration, we follow a prototypical arc from the dismal outpost to the despair of the big city.

And the venerable Mike Leigh premiered a new film. Leigh coined the term 'anti-miserabilist' for *Happy-Go-Lucky* and it does offer a comic alternative to all the grit and misery often associated with social realism. Sally Hawkins' Polly personifies this spirit. Leigh, like other British directors, is devoted to complex portrayals of the everyday life of the working classes. His characters are grounded in the mundane material quotidian, unlike Demme's golden TV people, but still strikingly individualistic; this is the social reality of jobs, relationships, daily problems, family, and disappointments. Far from melodrama, the film's events are casually everyday—the narrative spine is provided by a series of driving lessons. Again, we have the results of devotion to acting and preparation of an ensemble—indeed for Leigh, something of a repertory troupe across many films—and a feeling of improvisation in all the performances. The exhilarating Polly dominates the film, but the film jokes about her over-

whelming character and the intense performances of secondary characters are strikingly memorable as well—the acting is part of the spectacle these working class characters can make of their everyday. Leigh is much more at home in this performance style than Demme—this world really feels lived. It is amazing how much suspense and anxiety we feel about a driving lesson and the unexpected anguish of the near-mad driving teacher!

Pedagogy runs through the film—Polly, exuberant, in her classroom of young children, offering life advice to her younger sister or refusing it from her older sister, in tango lessons with a memorably unhappy Spanish dancer, even the driving teacher's tortured memories of his miserable school days. If the film's everyday passage does not resolve much as dramatic structure, there is still something of a life lesson proposed. The 'pursuit of happiness' may have devolved from a once revolutionary demand to contemporary consumerist cant, but Polly's determination to live happily, to *not* be miserable, carries her through to a personal politics that is finally charmingly inspirational.

In contrast to the realism of these films, two films from the former communist nations of Eastern Europe were a

fascinating delight. Here we see a multiple combination of genres, both within cinema history and beyond—fairy tales, folk myths, film noir, city films, socialist realism, the circus. The visual designs are fabulous and magical, not bound to the everyday at all; and the acting styles are far from naturalism, foregrounding the physical, theatrical, declamatory and self-conscious.

Tears for Sale, from Serbia in the former Yugoslavia, was a wondrous fairy tale. High in the mountains, all the men have died in World War One and two virgin sisters, perhaps witches, are dispatched to find a man for this forlorn village of widows. Their incredible journey crosses paths with a traveling circus strongman, a dance-hall fraudster and possibly true love! Fairy tale moments like the near burning at the stake, a mined vineyard where love is really tested and a visually amazing return of the dead for a final waltz are beautifully conjured. But, unexpectedly, the girls' quest discovers, not just men, sex and romance, but modernity itself. The film becomes both an allegorical fantasy of the violence and tragedy of this Balkan nation and the archetypal journey from

the rural past to the modern city. We end in a fabulous modern Belgrade and the sisters decide to become 'modern 20th century girls'—certainly not bound by realism but still grounded in the familiar material social transformations of gender and family, industry and war, collectivity riven and remade, of modernity itself.

Zift, from Bulgaria, is almost as fantastic in its improbable narrative and its visual inventiveness. Director Javor Gardev, another young artist to follow, consciously plays off one powerful, if discredited, strand of the great realist tradition—the socialist realism of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This official style of state cultural policy, widely condemned if little seen or analyzed outside those countries, is here invoked as sots-art, the term in Eastern Europe for a parodic invocation of the old art form of official culture. This is not so much the conventions associated with realism as the use of the melodramatic and propagandistic as the kitsch—in characterizations, songs, slogans, anthems, buildings, speech - of everyday popular living, both critique and nostalgia. In *Zift*, the organizing story is

straight from Hollywood film noir—a doomed convict anti-hero, seeking the fortune supposedly due him after his release into sixties Sofia, lost in lies, flashbacks and hallucinations. This is another city film—a city of ponderous Stalinist architecture—and another tortured, probably failed, journey to modernity. But it is also the familiar 'night' of noir—betrayal among thieves, a *chanteuse fatale*, a voice over from the dead, corruption and evil behind official authority's facade—reset, for laughs, in this dark socialist city. This is blackly successful comedy, inventively re-styling Hollywood in Stalinist Sofia, and a long way from realism it seems. But we can also recall that these conventions and archetypes are direct from the gritty realism, Old Left anti-authoritarianism and refashioned European art of the twenties and thirties, that Hollywood artists, many emigrés included, molded into film noir. This may be an unexpected artistic and political migration but it is a moment in the long inspiring relationship of Hollywood and European cinema; and here we see an invigorating example of the constant re-inventions of cinema and realism.



Zift

Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*

TONY WILLIAMS

Most critics see decline in the last phase of Nicholas Ray's career resulting from his mistaken decision to direct two epics produced by Samuel Bronston. Although Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and *55 Days at Peking* (1963) receive support from Victor Perkins and Geoff Andrew, others are usually dismissive.¹ When *King of Kings* premiered, it became designated as just another overblown Biblical epic, labeled "I was a teenage Jesus", and treated according to conventional premises of the "decline and fall" thesis regarding a director's final works as inferior to earlier achievements. *King of Kings* is not without flaws. But it has been unjustly marginalized in most examinations of Ray's work. Michael Goodwin and Naomi Wise never ask Ray about this film in their otherwise comprehensive interview. Neither does Ray volunteer any information. Bernard Eisenschitz regards it as disappointing.² However, while *King of Kings* is not one of Ray's major achievements, it does contain significant features of authorship, cinematic style, and historical verisimilitude, making it far superior to contemporary counterparts, to say nothing of Mel Gibson's virulent anti-Semitic *The Passion of the Christ*.³

King of Kings differs from the average Hollywood biblical epic. The genre flourished in the silent and early sound era. But the Cold War conservative imprimatur of "In God We Trust" upon the American body politic during the Eisenhower era used Christianity as a method of social control. This was not just confined to the religious epic. Apart from McCarthyite inspired devotional tracts such as *The Next Voice You Hear* (1950) and conformist science fiction works involving different types of divine involvements into human affairs such as *Red Planet Mars* (1952) and *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (1955), declarations of faith also appeared in those hesitant 1950s explorations into social commentary. Martin Ritt's *No Down Payment* (1957) contains an early scene where Pat Hingle's brattish sons ask him why he does not go to church on Sundays in a manner resembling the Hitler Youth and Parsons's children in George Orwell's *1984*. Despite revealing the dark side of suburbia, the film concludes affirmatively with the central characters, squeaky clean Jeffrey Hunter, devoted wife Patricia Owens, and Prodigal Father Pat happily leaving church. Declaring the faith in Hollywood was not just confined to contemporary Biblical epics. Aided by new technologies of Cinemascope and Stereophonic sound, *The Robe* (1953) and its sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) enabled the bombastic barnstorming vocal delivery of Jay

Robinson's camp Caligula to overwhelm the audience, to say nothing of heavenly choruses. The genre simply did not attract directors designated as auteurs by *Cahiers du Cinema* unless they were inclined to deliberately subvert its premises as Robert Aldrich (and blacklisted screenwriter Hugo Butler) did in *The Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1961). Indirect Marxist elements appeared within a narrative also emphasizing the powerful role of incestuous lesbian Queen Beria (Anouk Aimee) rather than Stewart Granger's moody patriarchal hero Lot.

Nicholas Ray had a difficult task ahead of him in terms of past precedents. He soon faced problems with Samuel Bronston, screenwriter Philip Yordan, and MGM who would refuse him final cut. Cecil B DeMille had filmed an earlier silent 1927 version starring H.B. Warner whom he carefully quarantined away from other actors and technicians between shots who might have disturbed the reverential qualities he wished his star to evoke. Most depictions of the Savior would reveal him as an unearthly presence as in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), sometimes depict him from behind, or as an off-screen presence privileged to the reverential gaze of Charlton Heston in William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959). The most cumbersome depiction occurred in George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) starring Ingmar Bergman's Max von Sydow surrounded by a contemporary gallery of "Who's Who in Hollywood" headed by John Wayne's overweight Roman Centurion uttering that unforgettable line "Truly, this was the son of Gawd." By contrast, Ray managed to avoid past and future clichés to direct a film Andrew has aptly described as having "aged considerably better than most biblical epics."⁴

I'm a Stranger Here Myself.

That familiar line spoken by Sterling Hayden in *Johnny Guitar* (1954), scripted by Philip Yordan, is also relevant to Jeffrey Hunter's Jesus. Bronston originally hoped that John Farrow or John Ford would direct *King of Kings* under its former title *The Man from Nazareth* (evoking the title of Anthony Mann's 1955 Western *The Man from Laramie* also scripted by Yordan). Like Michael Rennie in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), Ray's hero is an "unearthly stranger." However, his significance stems less from any superior *Übermensch* claims for religious adoration but more from his embodiment of peaceful utopian ideals many Ray protagonists attempt but very rarely achieve. Ray's Jesus is a man



Jeffrey Hunter as Christ



of peace, a rebel with a cause, but influencing others by humanitarianism rather than divine powers. Unlike characters from *In a Lonely Place* (1950), *Bitter Victory* (1957) and *Wind across the Everglades* (1958) who are incapable of attaining any form of psychological stability, Ray's Messiah incarnates those qualities of harmony and peace temporarily achieved by those doomed lovers in *They Live by Night* (1948) and finally gained by their more mature counterparts in *Party Girl* (1958). Jesus also displays those gentle qualities attracting Judy to Jim in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Although suffering fewer contradictions than Jim Stark, this Jesus is also prone to emotions as seen by his "panic attack"⁵ in the Garden of Gethsemane and his anger towards Peter/Royal Dano after he witnesses his betrayal outside the High Priest's dwelling. Like Johnny Logan of *Johnny Guitar*, Jesus wishes to be a man of peace. But he is also prone to dark emotions like Johnny after Turkey's adolescent display of fire power. These parallels illustrate how Ray directs a difficult role. They also reveal his strategy in again making a character believable. As Perkins recognized four decades ago, it is the result of a particular consistency within a certain form of direction involving the "search for the particular truth of each particular situation."⁶ This insight also helps explain the appeal of a film not

only depicting the most historical representation of the era but also one utilizing a particular type of radical New Testament scholarship often marginalized in mainstream discourses.

Ray's Search for the Historical Jesus.

Since the beginning of biblical historical scholarship in the late nineteenth century Ernest Renan, Albert Schweitzer, and others engaged on a quest for the historical Jesus hindered both by reliable evidence and the institutional role of the "risen Christ" interpretation first promoted in the Hellenistic world by the former Saul of Tarsus and henceforth accepted as gospel truth. Who was the historical Jesus born as a Jew in first century Palestine under Roman Occupation? Was he different from the figure developed by Paul and his followers? Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* presents a human Jesus. His significance parallels a certain tendency of past and present New Testament scholarship either ignored or marginalized,

Ray and Yordan worked on the screenplay with Catholic Oxford Don the Reverend George Kilpatrick who remained on the set during filming. Ray expressed his indebtedness to this scholar in a letter to Samuel Bronston. On March 8, 1960 Bronston gained an audience with Pope John XXIII who

approved a script credited to Yordan and Catholic writer Diego Fabbri. The latter had written a play that also influenced the character of Ray's Judas who, in the film, becomes not the embodiment of archetypal evil, but a guerilla who believes that Jesus will call on heavenly forces to aid the cause of Jewish independence if forced into a life-threatening situation.⁷ *King of Kings* humanizes Messiah and betrayer placing both within their contemporary social context and making them believable paralleling Perkins's recognition of Ray as a director seeking the "particular truth of each particular situation." The key figure in this construction of Judas may be Nicholas Ray. Judas/Rip Torn resembles the character of Crunch/Frank Mazzola in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Played by the real-life leader of an actual Hollywood gang, Crunch acts in a manner similar to Emma Small/Mercedes McCambridge in *Johnny Guitar*. Both stir situations for their own advantage.⁸ Crunch provokes Buzz/Corey Allen to begin the knife fight with Jim outside the Planetarium and later influences the remaining gang members to go on the vengeance trail following Buzz's accidental death. Judas differs from Crunch in being sincerely mistaken about the Messianic status of Jesus. But he also initiates a tragic situation.

As an Oxford Don, Kilpatrick must have known certain radical interpretations of New Testament scholarship concerning the roots of Christianity opposing the officially approved version influenced by Paul's Hellenistic concept of the "dying and rising God". Manchester University Comparative Religion scholar S.G.F. Brandon (1907-1971) had written a study of New Testament origins, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (1951), the ideas of which he would later expand in *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967) and *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (1968). Brandon's thesis envisaged a vast difference between early Christianity and the later version successfully promoted by Paul who transformed the Jesus of history into a supernatural being. The original Jesus was a politically aware activist working against the contemporary establishment and executed by the Romans for sedition. Although he did not belong to the guerilla Zealot movement, he was sympathetic to their cause and even had one as a disciple – Simon, the Zealot. One interpretation of Judas's surname "Iscaiot" derives it from the Latin term "sicarius" (or "dagger man") identifying him as a political assassin. Ray reproduces these ideas in the exchange between Pilate/Hurd Hatfield and Lucius/Ron Randell following the mention of Judean guerilla movements.

Pilate .Who are these men—bandits?

Lucius. They call themselves patriots.

Like Judas, High Priest Caiaphas/Guy Rolfe is no archetypal bad guy. He exhibits genuine concern for his people who may be slaughtered by the Romans if another disastrous uprising begins and fear for his fate and others appointed by Rome who would face retaliation as collaborators. "The people have little love for anyone appointed by the Emperor." Following the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the collapse of Jewish Christianity, Brandon argues that the authors of the four Gospels deliberately obscured the original Jesus and his relationship to national independence movements to prepare the way for acceptance by

the wider Gentile world. This also led to two thousand years of anti-Semitism of which Mel Gibson's film is the most recent example.

Brandon was not the first scholar to make such arguments but he was the one who expressed the most radical interpretation of the surviving evidence. Robert Eisler (1882-1949), Hugh J. Schonfield (1901-1988), Hiram Maccoby (1924-2004), and Robert Eisenman reached similar conclusions. Eisenman was instrumental in opening access to previously unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls which reveal that certain ideas appearing in the New Testament were not as unique as previously believed. Eisenman's books, *James, the Brother of Jesus: A Higher Critical Evaluation* (1999) and *The New Testament Code: The Cup of the Lord, the Damascus Covenant, and the Blood of Christ* (2006), continue Brandon's arguments. But they use new findings that reveal distinct differences between what may have actually happened and how institutional discourses reinterpreted the evidence.

Ray may not have read Brandon's 1951 study but Kilpatrick could have made him aware of a certain type of biblical scholarship opposing establishment ideas. The director probably incorporated these ideas into his film and developed them in his own particular style and manner.

Unlike most New Testament epics, the film begins with the successful conquest of Palestine under the Roman General Pompey in 63 B.C. The occupying power then sets up the Arabic Herod dynasty as a puppet government in the same way contemporary American foreign policy installed the Diem Regime in South Vietnam and others in Latin America and elsewhere who had no real ethnic and social connections over the people they ruled. Ray's first century Judea is a province desiring liberation from an occupying power, seeking a leader who will achieve cultural and political independence, favoring those who would achieve it by violent methods. Barabbas/Harry Guardino offers one solution: Jesus of Nazareth, another. Ray depicts this contrast by his fire and water symbolism. Jesus and Barabbas reflect opposing characters in Ray films such as *Bitter Victory* and *Wind across the Everglades* with the exception now being that one is less flawed than the other. Barabbas belongs to the Zealot movement seeking violent means of independence from Rome. Contemporary historical documents such as the writings of Jewish historian Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that the era desired a Messiah who would achieve religious and political independence from Rome. To Ray's credit, he recognizes Barabbas as a guerilla leader, a rebel with a cause, genuinely seeking the freedom of his people, and not the crude bandit depicted by Anthony Quinn in Richard Fleischer's *Barabbas* (1962). By contrast, Jesus is no supernatural figure but a man of peace following principles Lucius reports to Pilate after witnessing the Sermon on the Mount. "He spoke of peace, love, and the brotherhood of man." At Jesus's trial before Pilate (meticulously recorded by stenographers in a humorous and ironic reference to Ray's 1949 courtroom drama *Knock on any Door*), Lucius pleads for the life of a very different Nick Romano figure. "Not once did he speak to incite violence, only peace." However, representing institutional power, Pilate can not allow alternatives to the system and deliberately misrepresents evidence. "Leave everything and follow him? No money for taxes!"

"Look at the eyes! And the ascetic look on the face!"

Ray made these comments seeing Max von Sydow amidst footage of actors he viewed for casting his leading actor. However, Ray chose Jeffrey Hunter. Although Hunter is less ascetic and more human than von Sydow, the eyes still play a key role in the film. But they are due more to Ray's reinterpretation of a visual motif that occurred in his early film noir *In a Lonely Place* (1950). The film opens with the famous rear mirror view shot of Dixon Steele's eyes as he drives through the alienating Los Angeles urban landscape. When Steele/Humphrey Bogart later recreates the murder of a victim, Ray lights up his eyes in a sinister manner suggesting the darker undercurrents of his imagination. *King of Kings* also displays close-ups of the eyes of characters in certain scenes. Here they are less sinister. They illustrate the powers of imagination but Ray now uses them in a very different manner. Although MGM drastically re-edited *King of Kings*, the final version does contain surviving traces of Ray's various attempts of making this film a unique exercise in imagination and perception emphasizing the role of mind over matter. Certain surviving scenes suggest that Ray attempted one of the most searching examinations of the power of imagination ever to have appeared so far on the screen in any religious epic. Ray humanizes his Savoir and suggests that imagination plays a more powerful role in religious perception than any concept of supernatural reality. Jesus' encounters with John the Baptist/Robert Ryan illustrate these ideas in *King of Kings*.

John's baptism in *King of Kings* deliberately contradicts standard New Testament accounts. The heavenly voice pronouncing "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased" does not occur. Neither does the heavenly dove. Instead, Jesus' entry into the sequence is low-key. It is certainly no "star entrance" in either Hollywood or Biblical senses of the term. John suddenly discovers Jesus waiting in line and never even baptizes him. Ray articulates a particular type of cinematic recognition, not without levels of ambiguity, utilizing an interchange of close-ups concentrating on the eyes of both figures. Is he or isn't he? By selecting an actor well-known for his portrayal of insecure males in Hollywood cinema (rather than Charlton Heston in the Stevens version) to play John, Ray introduces doubt into the narrative as to whether this Savoir is divine or merely an ordinary man who makes an influential impression on other people that may not be heavenly at all. Due to the baggage of the religious epic and MGM's later re-editing, Ray can not make this tension fully explicit. Nevertheless traces do exist within the surviving version.

Perkins notices the important role of the gaze both in *King and Kings* and the rest of the director's work. "Throughout any Ray movie one finds a complete mastery of the – often contradictory – action which expresses more than it does, the ability to convey an idea through a gesture, a hesitation, a movement of the eyes. Much of the meaning of *King of Kings* is contained in its intricate pattern of looking, glaring and staring. Salome's motivations are revealed almost entirely in these terms."⁹

An exchange of looks occurs between Jesus and Lucius during the request to see the imprisoned John. Jesus tells Lucius "You are a prisoner because you place your faith in the sword." Ray next demonstrates John's awareness of Jesus's presence by a

shadow on the floor. This shadow imagery is important because it occurs during other parts of the film, often significantly during deliberately underplayed miracle sequences, as if suggesting the power of mind over matter; a power associated more with wish-fulfillment than supernatural agency. It is not accidental that *King of Kings* never displays the most astonishing examples of Christ's miracles such as the feeding of the multitude with five loaves and two fishes and walking on the water. Instead, they are mentioned in a report Lucius reads to Pilate implying that they are based on dubious sources. Pilate's response – "I never heard such absolute nonsense" – is probably shared by Ray himself. In *King of Kings*, "seeing is believing." But what Ray shows is not supernatural. As John climbs up the wall of his cell to ask for Jesus's blessing, a light falls on his face. It evokes that harsh light falling on Dixon Steele's face in the famous scene from *In a Lonely Place* causing his audience to question whether what he tells is truth or fiction. Prior to his execution and his doubt concerning Jesus after a message he relays via Lucius ("Art thou he that cometh or should we look for another?"), John hears Jesus's voice off-screen affirming his belief. This time Jesus is not present. But the scene strongly suggests that John convinces himself of the truth by the force of his own mind. Like most scenes in the film, the depiction is not supernatural but displayed in an ambiguous manner. Has John convinced himself like those fortunate recipients of Jesus's healing embodying the operation of mind over matter? Agency may be the result of untapped human potential rather than any intrusive form of external supernatural intervention.

The scene resembles the earlier warning to Joseph leading to the escape into Egypt. We never hear the message nor does it need the presence of a heavenly angelic body since Joseph discovers it from a dream and dreams do not necessarily reproduce everyday concepts of reality. Jesus can also read the minds of those around him, even Judas. Before the Last Supper, he tells his betrayer, "What you must do, do quickly." Ray here uses a choker close-up similar to the one he earlier used in *They Live by Night* to depict the grotesque face of Chicamaw/Howard Da Silva. Both characters are violent men. Ray also downplays the usual depiction of the temptation in the wilderness filming it in such a manner that it resembles a hallucination on the part of Jesus. The offer of "all the kingdoms of the earth" occurs in imagery deliberately evoking a mirage. Is Jesus the Son of God or a deluded character? *King of Kings* anticipates the thesis of *The Passover Plot* (1965) by Hugo J. Schonfield that suggested the Crucifixion was part of an attempt by Jesus to fulfill contemporary Messianic expectations but the plan went disastrously wrong. Caiaphas's remark, "In my opinion, this man seeks martyrdom", indirectly supports this idea. Ray directs *King of Kings* suggestively, leaving it open for each viewer to make their own interpretations.

Bigger than Life

Despite its generic associations, *King of Kings* is as hybrid as Ray's other films. It is not surprising that he also incorporates his version of the Hollywood melodrama into this film. As in *They Live by Night* and *Rebel without a Cause*, Ray juxtaposes his idealistic version of the family with its negative social counterpart. As a

product of his era Ray hopes that the institution may work but his creative sensibilities intuitively recognize such hopes are often futile. Darkness surrounds Bowie and Keechie at the end of *They Live by Night*. *Rebel's* conclusion offers no explicit guarantee that Jim and Judy will not eventually end up like their parents. In *King of Kings* Ray depicts his idyllic family in the form of Mary/Siobhan McKenna and Jesus as a relationship between equals rather than any hierarchical patriarchal one. When Mary Magdalene/Carmen Sevilla visits the home of Jesus, the former "woman taken in adultery" receives a gentle welcome rather than being regarded as a sexual threat to her son. Mother Mary (whose "Virgin" status is thankfully ignored in this film) is no Mrs. Bates of *Psycho*. She welcomes Mary Magdalene as surrogate daughter and companion. By contrast, the court of King Herod represents a nightmare version of the typical family of Hollywood melodrama whose aberrations Ray had earlier explored in *Bigger than Life* (1956). Herod Antipas (Frank Thring) is Ray's Biblical version of Ed Avery. He eagerly waits for the time when he can displace his father and gain royal power. Once enthroned, he seduces his brother's wife and incestuously lusts after her daughter Salome. Salome/Brigid Bazlen is the juvenile delinquent in this royal family who plays on her stepfather's lustful desires to gain the head of John the Baptist as if seeking a

new toy. She is also the film's "rebel without a cause." Her dance is no accomplished performance, similar to Vicki's routines in *Party Girl* (1958), but rather a petulant display of adolescent seductiveness manipulating patriarchal lust as well as sexually challenging her mother Herodias/Rita Gam. Antipas's line emphasizes this. "Come and sit next to me and I will give you the throne of your mother." Salome represents a dark version of the early Judy in *Rebel without a Cause*. Unable to renegotiate her oedipal feelings, she achieves what Judy escapes: sleeping with Father. During this sequence, Ray uses both a birdcage to symbolize Salome's dangerous self-willed entrapment as well as the sound of a bird which occurs when she asks for the head of John the Baptist. It is as ominous as the sound of the train whistle that heralds Bowie's doom in *They Live by Night*. The audience later sees her in a regressive catatonic position next to a birdcage. As well as depicting remorse for John's death, Ray also suggests that she has become a victim of incestuous child abuse. By contrast, Herodias stands by Herod's side in a slit-legged costume resembling a Biblical Cyd Charisse awaiting her next competitive "invitation to the dance" of family sexual politics. Pilate and Claudia/Viveca Lindfors constantly bicker. Like Col. Thursday in *Fort Apache* (1948), he complains to her about his posting to an undesirable territory and Ray suggests that his



Bigger than Life



order to execute Jesus has little to do with political reasons and more with his jealous resentment of a rival. "He is different. He refuses to behave like others. And if he can influence even Caesar's daughter he is dangerous." Both Pilate and Antipas are often seen together more at ease in their own company than with their respective families.

Is He or Isn't He?

King of Kings indicts society and its institutions as much as *They Live by Night*, *Knock on any Door*, *In a Lonely Place*, *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), *The Lusty Men* (1952), *Johnny Guitar*, *Run for Cover* (1954), *Hot Blood* (1956), *Wind Across the Everglades*, and *The Savage Innocents* (1960). Like these films, *King of Kings* presents its own problematic search for an alternative community. The film really works when emphasis falls upon Jesus as a human person with the capacity to inspire others as well as those occasions where miracles result from his evoking healing qualities dormant within the human mind. But *King of Kings* belongs to a specific genre and can not entirely avoid its associated supernatural overtones. Where such instances occur, they are probably due either to MGM re-editing or insistence on further shooting such as that that clumsy scene where Mary encounters the resurrected Jesus. It would have been far better to eliminate that badly acted encounter since it undermines the deliberate ambivalence existing in the rest of the film. Ray implicitly evokes audience skepticism concerning the nature of the actual events and also suggests that many characters actively engage in wish-fulfillment rather than experience divine intervention. Jesus may also be mistaken about his divine significance. *King of Kings* documents the era's desire for a leader but it also shows that Ray's Jesus of Nazareth defied contemporary expectations for a violent Messiah. Instead Jesus removes the Twelve Disciples from the temptations of society and instructs them outside civilization before the entry into Jerusalem. Lucius explains his decision to remain in Judea long after the expiration of his tour of duty to Pilate. "Where else would I go...Society would destroy me." Like Jesus, Lucius could also say, "I'm a Stranger here myself." Despite his occupation and the violent acts society has forced him into performing, Lucius has deep humanitarian instincts. He allows Jesus to survive the Massacre of the Innocents a decade later when he discovers that he escaped. This scene ironically follows the attempt by a rich merchant (George Coulouris) to employ the young Jesus. Fortunately, his parents do not resemble the dysfunctional family of Charles Foster Kane who exile their son into the capitalist world of Mr. Thatcher in *Citizen Kane* (1941). *King of Kings* also displays Ray's method of dualistic relationships. But unlike *Bitter Victory* and *Wind across the Everglades*, *King of Kings* contains parallels between more than two characters such as Jesus, Lucius, Judas, and Barabbas.

Although Ray never shot the last scene of *King of Kings*, the depiction complements his intentions to undermine the usual generic conclusion of a religious movie. Surprisingly, the risen Christ is never seen. Instead, an off-screen voice occurs sends the disciples on their mission. This may all be happening in their minds. It also resembles the final revelation to John the Baptist prior to his death where Jesus is never seen. A huge shadow falls

across the sand forming a Cross as it passes a huge fishing net on the shore. Although the imagery is religious, the Sea of Galilee is in the background of the frame symbolizing a positive resolution earlier suggested by the water imagery occurring in the final shot of *Johnny Guitar* where Johnny and Vienna finally leave a violent society. It reveals the victory of the life-affirming water symbolism defining Jesus rather than the fire evoking the violent methods of Barabbas and Judas. *King of Kings* concludes positively in the present time of the film where utopian hopes exist for peace and harmony. It never looks towards a future where later institutional discourses and practices pervert those progressive elements characterizing the original message of Jesus of Nazareth. *King of Kings* suggests that such humanitarian qualities are still possible to realize but only outside a social order whose institutional attempts to corrupt everybody before, during, and after Jesus's life are sadly well known. Although *King of Kings* was "atrociously edited", falling far short of achieving those unique creative elements Jean Mitry defined as the essence of cinema in his *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (1963), it is nonetheless a Nicholas Ray film deserving further evaluation.

I'd like to thank my Spring Semester 2008 Nicholas Ray class for their excellent essays and the inspiration they have given me towards writing this article.

Tony Williams is Professor and Area Head of Film Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale whose most appropriate attitude to academia is Nick Ray's "I'm a Stranger here myself."

Notes

1. Victor Perkins, "The Cinema of Nicholas Ray." *Movie Reader*. Ed. Ian Cameron. London: November Books, 64-70, especially pp. 69, 70; Geoff Andrew, *The Films of Nicholas Ray: The Poet of Nightfall*. New Edition. London: British Film Institute, 2004, 141-145, 176-177.
2. Michael Wise and Naomi Goodwin, "Nicholas Ray: Rebel," *Take One* 5.6 (1977): 7-21; Bernard Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey*. Translated by Tom Milne, London: Faber and Faber, 1993, 360-376. Listing Ray's undisputable 18 masterpieces, Jonathan Rosenbaum states that there are "potent stretches in most of the others, including even *King of Kings*." See "Nicholas Ray. Great Directors." <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/raynick.html>.
3. Popularly known as "The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre" and responsible for evoking anti-Semitic feelings at the time of its release, paralleling the manner in which D.W.Griffith's *The Birth of the Nation* (1915) boosted the fortunes of the Ku Klux Klan earlier, this film has received little historical analysis. For one notable exception see David Walsh, "The Passion of the Christ." *World Socialist Web Site: Arts Review*. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/>
4. Andrew, 177.
5. This term was used by a student in a final paper for my Spring semester class on Nicholas Ray.
6. Perkins, 65.
7. See Eisenschitz, 363-364.
8. See Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without A Cause*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005, 62-68.
9. Perkins, 65. Blaine Allen also notes that the encounters with John and the skeptical figure of Lucius "are constructed through exchanges of looks. Characters being conscious of each other, and reinforce the level of the interpersonal and the physical." See *Nicholas Ray: A Guide to References and Resources*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984, 33. In his *Movie* interview Ray complained that *King of Kings* was "atrociously edited" with a lot of material cut out: "Claudia and Lucius having an almost telepathic relationship." See "Interview with Nicholas Ray." *Movie* 9 (1963): 23.

We the Undead

NADJA

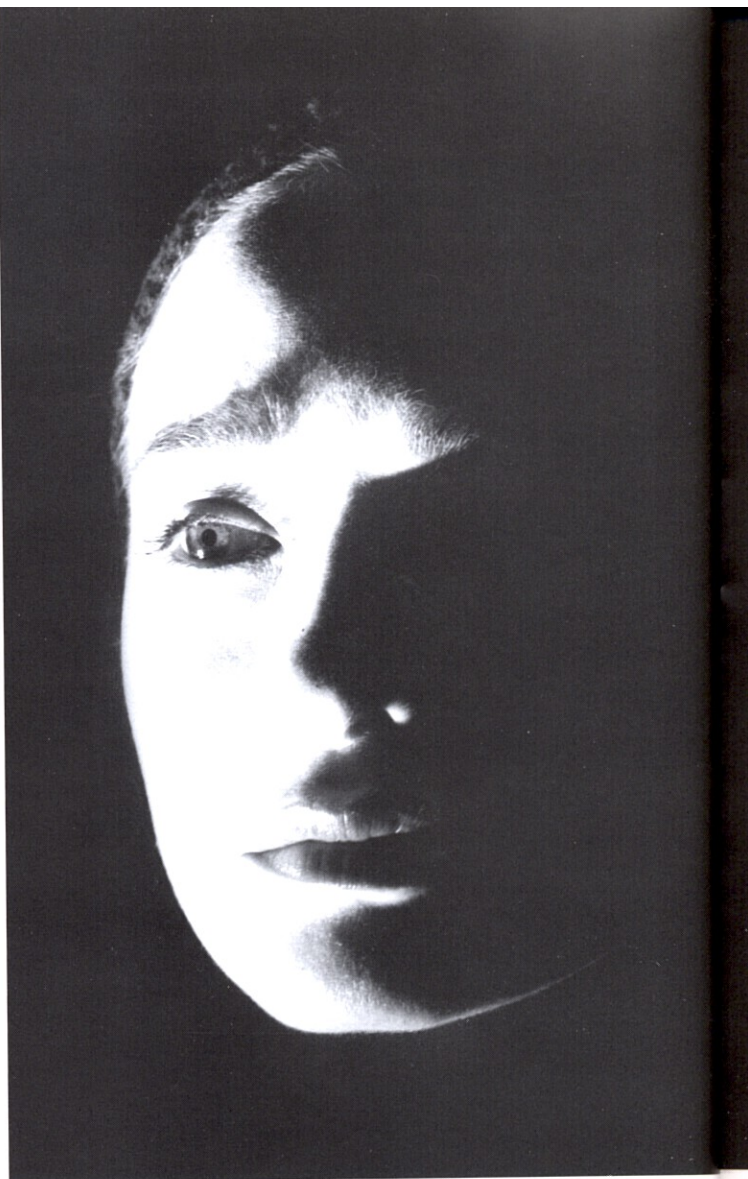
GEORGE PORCARI

In the sky of the cinema people learn what they might have been and discover what belongs to them apart from their single lives. Its essential subject—in our century of disappearances—is the soul, to which it offers a global refuge. This, I believe, is the key to its longing and its appeal.

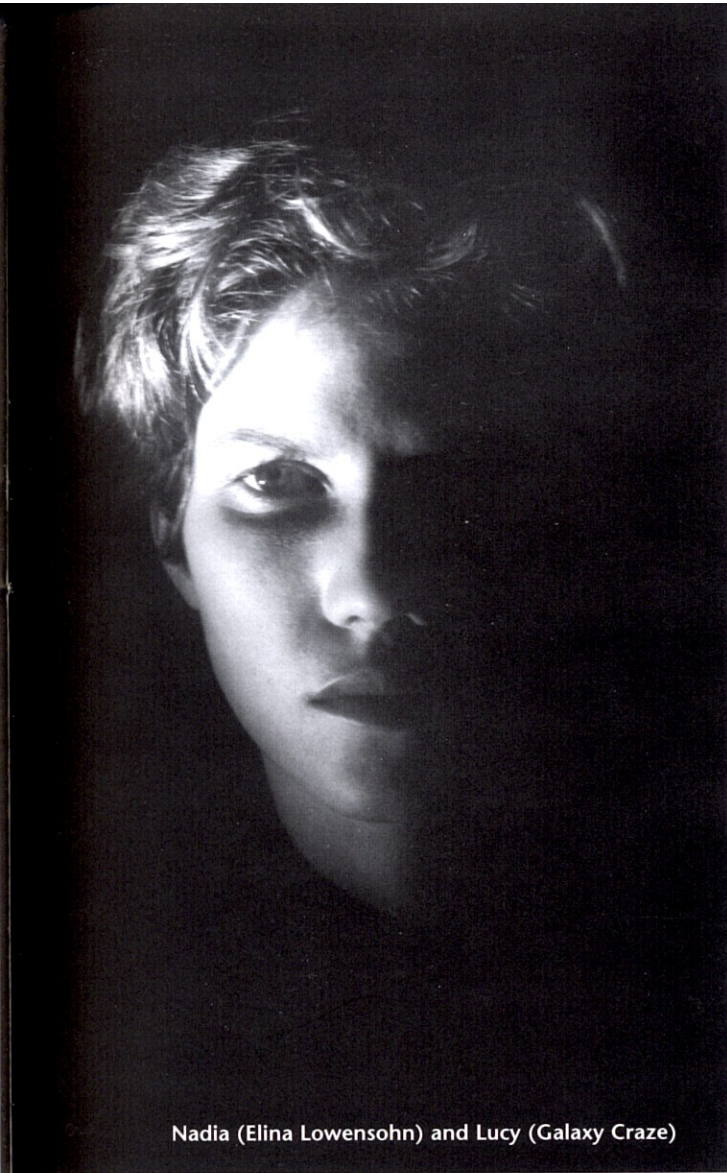
—John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous*

Michael Almayreda's brilliant black and white film *Nadja* (1944) opens with a montage which overlays various images of contemporary Manhattan at night seen from a moving car as we hear the music of The Verve and hear the voice of Nadja: "Night. Nights without sleep. Long nights in which the brain lights up like a big city". The dense black and white montage eloquently suggests surrealist films such as *Entre'acte* by Rene Clair and *Return to Reason* by Man Ray. Part of this sequence is shot with 35mm film and part with a pixel camera, which is a video camera that records on audio-cassette tapes: the image, as one would expect, is diagrammatic in that one can easily see the individual pixels that make up an image. This montage, which we might call an overture, explicitly states the themes: Night as a psychological state, the mysteries of nature and its relation to cities and the multiple realities of consciousness and their relation to external reality. We cut from this very poetic effect to flat conventional matching close-ups inside a bar in New York City. Mirroring the shift in montage Nadja's talk goes from overly poetic reverie to banal bar talk. The man listening to her smokes a cigarette and nods mindlessly to whatever Nadja is saying. In the next moment, as they fuck in a car, Nadja bites his neck. With the pixilated camera we see her lap up the blood with her tongue. She then receives what will later be described as a "psychic fax", shot with a pixilated camera, in which she "sees" her father killed by a wooden stake through the heart. The rest of the film borrows liberally from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and from Andre Breton's *Nadja*, using these works to describe the doubts about identity and the uncertain connections between life and death. The film seeks not to resolve such complexities but to articulate them so they make some sense of the present.

Breton's *Nadja* was published in 1928. In it an unnamed narrator—presumably Breton himself—in the midst of walks in Paris



by night finds a beautiful woman who may or may not be real—who may or may not "scorn reason and law alike". The book is punctuated by photographs of fellow surrealists and everyday postcard subjects that take on a "surrealist" element because of their context in the narrative. *Nadja* is perhaps the most successful of the novels of this type—including Soupault's *Last Nights of Paris* and George Bataille's *The Eye*. The novel essentially charts the fluctuations in temperament and identity of the various characters in the book including the narrator himself. The novel's theme is laid out in the first sentence: "Who am I?" This is a question that is then not answered for 160 pages as Breton is interested in breaking the conventions of singular identities presiding over linear narratives. The fluid transformative and creative aspect of identity is examined in prose that mimics those states of consciousness that he is describing. It was felt by the surrealists generally, and by Breton with indignation in various manifestos, that reason was an enemy to be brought down. It was perceived that the results of the "triumph of reason" were massive wars that killed millions, industrial slavery and repressed and unhappy "sleepwalkers"—city dwellers—out of touch even with their own needs and desires. Whatever one thinks of Surrealism as a method, it is difficult to disagree with the prognosis of its reason for being. A way had to be found to under-



Nadia (Elina Lowensohn) and Lucy (Galaxy Craze)

mine this base "rationalism" and discover—or re-discover (as "primitives" were presumed to have never lost touch with their holistic relation to nature) their true "self". Was such an enterprise possible? Dada had made a try at it but its antagonisms were seen as random and scattered. A more programmatic "scientific" approach was necessary. Various means were found that might achieve this end: Automatic writing, automatic drawing, shooting film with a blindfold, walking without direction, speaking without knowing what you are saying, taking drugs, alcohol, etc.—anything that might undermine reason. All of this was done with the utmost seriousness.

From the point of view of Breton, Nadja is the woman who rebels against reason "naturally"—that is—she is working class and her animus is seen as an instinctual loathing for the constricting mores of a society that is built on fear and repression. Her very freedom calls into question the principles of the society that she inhabits. Yet in Breton's book the realities of France in the late twenties socially or personally are not in any sense explored or even mentioned. Breton is not interested in the paradox that his plan of attack against reason is in itself rational—something to which he remains stunningly oblivious. He is also not interested in his own slumming and seduction of working class women and its effects on them in "real life". The girl who

was the model for *Nadja* apparently fell in love with Breton and, when her demands became "bourgeoise", she was summarily dismissed as the mascot of the surrealists. She was sent to a hospital to recover—as often happened to "hysterical" women who did not have a family to protect them. The novel in effect both romanticizes Nadja as a symbol of "uninhibited carnal pleasure without guilt" and keeps her at a distance as a symbol of the "fatal woman"—the syphilitic prostitute who haunts the streets of Paris. In short Nadja is both goddess and whore—the conventions of the traditional novel are not so far removed after all! The narrative dislocations are simply window dressing—"avant-garde" enough to create titters among the respectable classes. Almayereda's *Nadja* combines the myth of Dracula, which is about a fiend that lives indefinitely by taking people's blood—and thereby their souls—with Nadja, the myth of the *femme fatale* that lives indefinitely in the city taking men's hearts—and thereby their souls.

In a Manhattan bar Nadja meets Lucy—the doomed heroine of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—and they have a heart to heart. That these two heroines would meet is a brilliant Godardian conceit that immediately addresses the problem of class that Breton ignored. In Almayereda's film Nadja is a European aristocrat and Lucy is a working class American. Nadja is explaining that she is troubled by a meeting that will soon take place with her estranged brother who hates her. Lucy replies that she had a young brother that killed himself and that he was too young to have done it, as kids don't know anything. Nadja disagrees believing that young people know "everything"—but that they cannot defend themselves from what they know. Using new age argot, she explains to Lucy that she has "buried her primary pain which is poisoning the water supply. You must dare to dredge up the primary pain. It frees you. For myself I'm not afraid of anything. Life is full of pain but the only pain I feel is the pain of fleeting joy." Lucy replies that she doesn't know what that is. Nadja poses theatrically in front of a jukebox with spinning cd's as we hear her voice over: "I meet someone I love. I feel so much joy, then I know what's in front of me—I can't breathe—the pain of fleeting joy," We dissolve to black. This extraordinary scene states the theme of the film, which is the nature of identity. Nadja turns the phrase "blood relation" into a literal animal sense of identity in which the "self" is to be found not in the brain or the soul but in the blood.

Von Helsing who is Dracula's nemesis in Stoker's book is the classical scholar/scientist who believes in reason—here he is played by Peter Fonda with sardonic enthusiasm. He explains the realities of Dracula to Jim—Lucy's boyfriend and Jonathan Harker in Stoker's book. In Jim's Manhattan apartment Von Helsing tells Jim that Dracula has been on earth for thousands of years turning people into the "undead"—crazed zombies who walk the earth. At that point the film switches to 16mm found footage of various urban capitals with anonymous people walking the streets. The use of documentary footage to "prove" Von Helsing's remark about the living dead is both comical and poignant—since in fact much of the footage is dated and many of the people in the film are probably dead—but which ones? The question of identity also arises—who are these people? Is it "us"?—if so, what does that mean exactly?

In Lucy's apartment Nadja takes Lucy's blood, not from her neck but from between her legs. We see them kiss and lap up Lucy's menstrual blood through the pixel camera. Von Helsing helpfully explains about the blood: "Life and death, the moon the tides, the eternal flow. Women understand that kind of stuff, it's in their blood. Once a month their bodies let them know Nature is one continuous disaster." At one point Nadja digs into her own wrist letting the blood flow into her brother's mouth to feed him. At another point Nadja says "I am not sick. I am not bleeding all over myself. I am healthy!" Nadja treats blood as a delicacy to savor, yet she speaks about the superiority of plants to humans because the plant is complete, giving back everything it takes, whereas "it's hard to look at a medical book without feeling disgust for the whole human race—our bodies are so complicated and ugly." This ambivalence about blood and the body is part of a larger question about man's relationship to Nature and that is the central theme of romantic art.

For the Romantics there was nature as God, as a life force, always on the point of climax in the form of rain, wind, lightning, storms. As depicted in classical art, this aspect of nature is harmoniously designed so the relationship of part to whole is balanced. But for the Romantics nature has another side: It is a

death force indifferent before the ruins of civilization or mankind. This Nature is always damp, dark and in a state of decomposition. The slime of putrefaction and of fertility co-exist without logic, since we must die as part of nature's "plan", it remains powerful and unfathomable. A romantic poet like Blake accepted these great contradictions as essential to the balance between "heaven and hell"—in short, necessary to mankind's sound mental and spiritual health.

Nadja and Renfield—Dracula's zombified assistant in Stoker's book—go to the city morgue to see the remains of her father—impaled by Von Helsing. The mortuary night clerk, brilliantly played by David Lynch, is an autistic sleepwalker who is half dead already. In a sense he is the gatekeeper to death, the man who ferries people across the river, the silent stranger at the end of the train platform. His performance is both troubling and comical—exactly as his films. Nadja has no problems getting past Lynch and goes into the morgue.

Back in Jim's apartment, Von Helsing confesses that he loved Jim's mother and is in fact his real father. He then gives Jim an awkward fatherly embrace, stops to kill a harmless pet tarantula, explaining: "why it's the deadly Rumanian Actillo—his mouth is like a tiny poisoned guillotine!" Peter Fonda shows an incredibly developed sense of humor in playing the hapless "rational" man—a tweed suited book lover who uses a bicycle to get around Manhattan—in the face of the unknown.

Nadja and Renfield find her brother Edgar sick in bed being nursed by Cassandra, a nurse that Edgar has fallen in love with. Nadja points to a large urn containing her father's ashes and asks—with aristocratic ceremoniousness: "Can I...put them down?" Cassandra replies with a flat American matter-of-fact-ness "Sure put-em' down!" One of the great pleasures of *Nadja* is watching the different acting styles which Almayreda has chosen to play off against each other. Jean Renoir was a master of this sort of orchestration, but he used it to different ends. For Renoir the differences in acting styles was a means to speak about identity not as a social construction—as we see in Neo-Realism—or as an ensemble of homogeneous stereotypes—as we see in Hollywood films—but as a way to observe people's social, hereditary and race differences in action. For Renoir, this was pleasure. In *Nadja* the various acting styles show a Metropolis in which people may all speak English, with varying degrees of success, but are not close to understanding one another at even a basic level. Edgar tells Nadja in Rumanian that if he could he would impale her with a stake. Nadja translates this to mean he wants another cigarette. Edgar wants to kill Nadja because of the incestuous hold that Nadja has over him which must end with marriage or death—and in fact ends with both.

Edgar receives a "psychic fax" telling him that Nadja is returning to Romania and has taken Cassandra with her. Edgar decides to return to Rumania and kill Nadja. In the only shot in the film reminiscent of Tod Browning's *Dracula*, we see Nadja's castle through streams of emblematic fog. Inside the castle, the interior design



Dracula (1931)

resembles a Manhattan loft—the incongruities multiply as Nadja uses transfusion equipment to exchange blood with Cassandra—literally escaping into her body—by transfusing her blood (soul) into her body. Von Hesling breaks into the castle and he and Edgar put a stake into Nadja's heart. Cassandra awakens after the transfusion and kisses Edgar but from the look on her face it is obviously Nadja. She has transferred her "self" to Cassandra through the transfusion and now Nadja's blood is flowing in Cassandra's body. At that moment the image switches to negative, creating a beautiful sense of fusion, as if there had been a silent implosion as they say happens just before an atomic blast.

From a sign etched in granite reading "Administration of Justice" atop a classical building, the camera pans down to a marriage ceremony between Cassandra (now Nadja) and her brother Edgar. He marries Nadja—his sister—bringing the familial relationships full circle. Nadja in voice-over: "They didn't know it was me". We then see a montage which returns us to the overlay of images at the beginning of the film as we see alternating close-ups of Cassandra and Nadja floating in water. In this liquid state Nadja looks up at the clouds which we see reflected in the water. We hear Nadja/Cassandra in voice-over: "I have walked behind the sky. We are all animals but there is a better way to live. Sometimes at night I hear a voice in my head. Is that you Nadja? Is it true that the beyond—that everything beyond is here in this life? I can't hear you. Who's there? Is it me? Is it myself?" Nadja's doubts about her identity, due to the transfusion have caused her to ask questions about the exact nature of the location of the self. Nadja/Cassandra is both inside and outside of death at the same time. She is now conscious of these two moments as one moment. Her uncertainty regarding her identity is part of that discovery: that she is neither alive nor dead but "undead". Much like contemporary thought experiments in physics, Nadja can no longer locate "life" or "death" but only the interference between them as the ripple effects they produce interpenetrate. Nadja understands her condition in a way that her father and brother could not or would not (because of the cycles of blood that a Von Hesling spoke of?) yet she questions the necessity for this. ("Is it true that everything beyond is here in this life?") That is why it is only at the end that Nadja becomes truly alive. She is vulnerable. She doesn't know who she is. Then she is human. Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* ends in a very similar fashion, with the main character floating in a small boat on his back looking up at the sky a few moments before he dies. In Nadja this death is also a rebirth. It is here that we see the vast gulf that separates Nadja's self-awareness from Breton's shallow adolescent wanderings where misogyny and romance mix uneasily. The "search" in his *Nadja* was a masturbatory projection in which he would play every part—there is really only Breton. Even "real" women must learn to become projections of male fantasy for Breton, or they are disposed of at that point they make demands and the dream is shattered. It's all about this dream and the dream is all about power. In Almeréyda's film Nadja finds

her own way to survive, but she does not find her own voice. He can't give her that because he's a man—he can only go so far. She sucks the blood. She takes the souls of the "living-dead". She lives. The death and re-birth of Nadja/Cassandra occurring while she floats in water creates an aura that is essentially religious. This occurs because water has no boundaries that we can see with any clarity—it is both a substance that we see into and it is a mirror in which we can see the sky. Nadja accedes to the doubts about her own identity as endemic to the condition of being human in a way that Breton could never do. The effect of floating on one's back looking up at the sky is to lose oneself in something that is larger and greater than the self which Nadja divests herself of in the final moments of the film. She crosses many boundaries at that point—age old certainties about "life" and "death" as separate domains—the romanticism of *Dracula* and *Nadja*—and she becomes a woman. The inevitable question arises: now where does she go from there?

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Dead Man (1996)

Atrocities at the Door

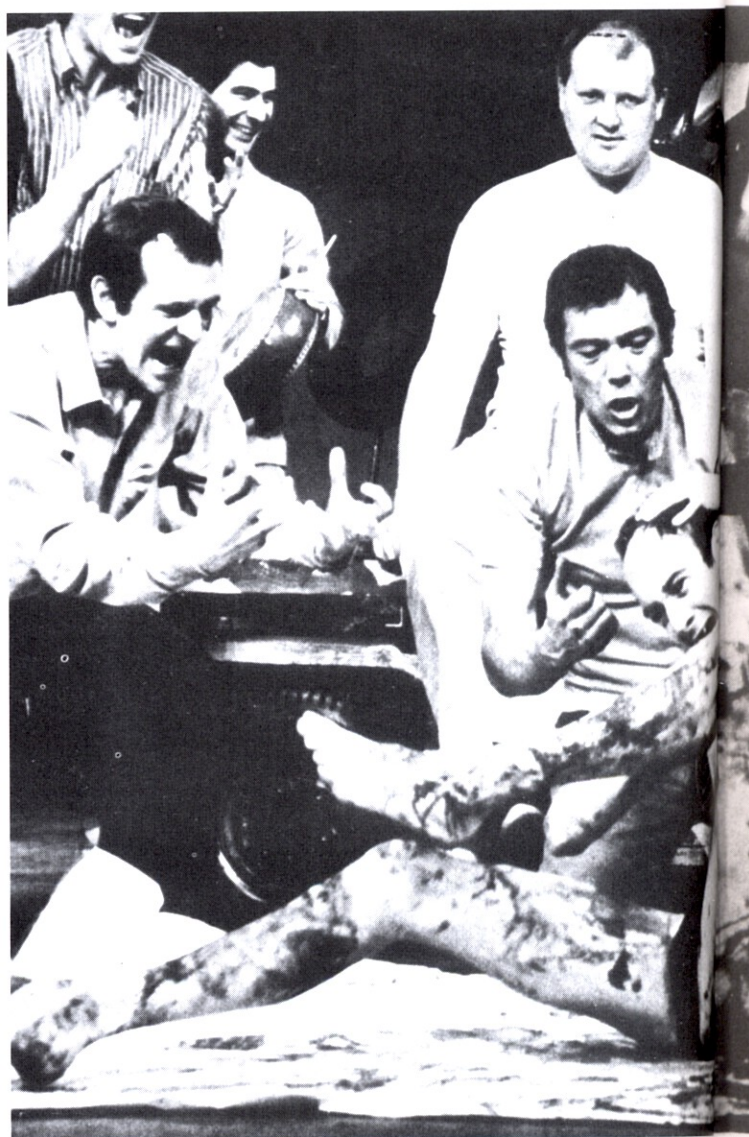
PETER BROOK'S *TELL ME LIES*, IMAGES OF TERROR
AND BRECHTIAN AESTHETICS

SCOTT MACKENZIE

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself in to the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement.

—Bertolt Brecht¹

If, as Paul Virilio contends, the technologies of warfare and the cinema are intrinsically tied in their development of new *régimes* of sight, one must then question the ways in which the cinema has been mobilized in its representations of war. Indeed, one must also examine how filmmakers have analysed the cinema's deployment both as a tool of war-mongering propaganda, and as a means to denaturalise these very representations. Given the present-day contexts of wars on 'terror' and 'axis of evil'—wars against concepts more so than geographically-defined nation-states—a reconsideration of the ways wars come to have meaning through the mediation of moving image technologies is central to any understanding of the Western epistemology of war.² The present-day ubiquity of images of warfare foregrounds the need to historicise the means by which filmmakers have questioned the production of meaning through cinematic technology. The recent history of warfare—from the Gulf War to Bosnia and Kosovo, from Afghanistan to Iraq—foregrounds the incremental ways in which wars are fought through visual representations to an ever-increasing degree.³ One does not have to follow Jean Baudrillard's postulation that the Gulf War did not take place to recognise that a contemporary understanding of warfare is intrinsically tied to its mediation through moving images. With the plethora of semi-documentary 'images-of-war' in circulation, the need for a means of deconstructing these images becomes crucial, and in recent years this practice has re-emerged both in Hollywood, with films such as *Redacted* (Brian DePalma, US, 2007) and the *avant-garde* with works such as *14.3 Seconds* (John Greyson, Canada, 2008).



From the stage production of *US*

While Brechtian models of distanciation and self-reflexivity have taken on a central importance in these recent works, the denaturalisation of mediated, semi-documentary images of wars through the deployment of cinematic self-reflexivity does not constitute a new critical practice. One can trace this aesthetic development back to Alain Resnais' two films about World War II, memory and representation: *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, France, 1955) and *Hiroshima mon amour* (France, 1959), if not to the films of Chaplin, Gance and Eisenstein. Nevertheless, Resnais' films are the central texts that come to terms with the dislocated history and memory of war in post-World War II Europe. To this end, the opening scene of *Hiroshima mon amour* ably demonstrates the tension that lies at the heart of cinematic representations of war and atrocities. Whilst the spectator sees documentary images and reconstructions of the devastation wrought on Hiroshima by the dropping of the Atomic bomb, a Japanese man and a French woman discuss the tenuous relationship between sight and knowledge:

He: You saw nothing at Hiroshima. Nothing.
 She: I saw the newsreels. On the second day, History tells, I'm not making it up, on the second day certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and the ashes. Dogs were photographed. For all eternity. I saw them. I saw the newsreels. One the first day. On the second day. On the third day.
 He: (interrupting her):
 You saw nothing. Nothing.⁴

Writing on the relationship between Brecht, the theatre and the cinema, Peter Brook argued in 1960 that while, in his view, Brecht is of limited use in theatre, Brechtian aesthetics are of paramount importance to the cinema, especially in relation to new forms of documentary images. He argues that the advent of television has a great deal to do with the changing nature of spectatorship, and offers Resnais' film as a prime example of this shift:

I believe that the new cinema unconsciously exploits the new independence of the viewer that television has brought about. It is catering to an audience that is capable of judging an image—I'd quote *Hiroshima mon amour* as a supreme example of this. The camera is no longer an eye; it does not track us into the geographical reality of Hiroshima....The camera in *Hiroshima* presents us with a succession of documents which bring us face to face with the whole vast historical, human and emotional reality of Hiroshima in a form that is only moving to us through the use of our own, objective judgement. We go into it as it were with our eyes open.⁵

While Brook's position on the use-value of Brecht in the theatre is certainly open to question (Brook ran hot and cold on Brecht throughout his career), his reading of *Hiroshima mon amour* points to the epistemological tension between sight and knowledge that lies behind documentary cinema's claims to represent the 'real' and to the kinds of questions surrounding the representation of atrocities that Brook's own semi-documentary film *Tell Me Lies* (UK, 1968) raises a mere eight years later. This epistemological tension is even more pronounced today than at the height of the Cold War, when *Hiroshima mon amour* was released. In a time where images of warfare have taken on the appearance of virtual reality and a concurrent cynicism about the ability of these very images to communicate anything that approximates the 'real' has permeated many aspects of culture (the debates in both the Western and Arab world over Al-Jazeera foregrounds the fact that this is not solely an Anglo-European issue), one must reconsider the ways in which the self-reflexive analysis of the cinematic image can be deployed beyond the realms of post-modernist irony and pastiche which Thomas Elsaesser notes lies at the centre of contemporary representational strategies:





Thus what we see today is the devaluation of once radical techniques and stances, such as distancing or self-reflexivity. Not only have the media become vertiginously self-reflexive in the recycling of their own histories; their incessant self-parodies and intertextuality have made self-reflexiveness the sign of a closed, self-referential system, the very opposite of Brecht's 'open form' or of his concept of realism as contradiction.⁶

The depoliticisation of this once oppositional tradition that crystallised in the 1960s now calls out for re-evaluation. While documentary self-reflexive aesthetics have become a decontextualised formal strategy far more so than a political tool of self-critical agitation in contemporary *fin de siècle* culture—though some of the works of Michael Moore and, to a lesser degree, Morgan Spurlock are exceptions to the rule—their initial political imperative still has some distant reverberations today. For instance, a major turning point in the representation of cinematic warfare can be traced to the Viet Nam war and the shifting role played by visual media in that conflict. Here, hand-held cameras came together with the radical politics of the era to charge a given historical moment in such a way as to challenge the supposed transparency of the moving image. Yet, as radical politics and a certain cynicism about mainstream representations of the war came to the forefront in the United States and Britain, a series of questions arose: if one cannot trust the docu-

mentary image on the screen, how does one develop a viable, politically engaged way of responding to the images coming out of Viet Nam?

The Genesis of *US*

It is this quite paradoxical question that Peter Brook and the Royal Shakespeare Company attempted to address in the stage-play *US* and in its cinematic adaptation *Tell Me Lies*, a neo-Brechtian analysis of the role played by propagandistic images of violence and atrocities with regards to the conflict in Viet Nam and a concurrent analysis of how one might intervene through the theatre and cinema. In both cases, Brook and the RSC demonstrate an acute knowledge of medium-specificity: while *US* reconfigures the relationship between performer, script, stage and audience, *Tell Me Lies* self-reflexively analyses the nature of documentary and fictional cinematic representation, spectatorship and voyeurism.

US began as a workshop at the RSC to find a means by which to address the question of how to properly or effectively protest US actions in Viet Nam in the context of living in London. Brook explained the thought process behind the production to the actors and theatre workers at the RSC in the following manner: "The theatre ought to be able to speak about a subject as central as the Viet Nam war; no play existed that was in any way adequate; in working together we should try and create the circumstances in which such a play could be written."⁷ Over the course of three months, the actors, writers, lyricists and Brook engaged in various dramatic exercises and scenes that, through the workshop process were modified, challenged and at times discarded. For a ten-day period the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, best known for his theory and practice of 'poor theatre', worked with the group in order to sharpen the material and the actors' approaches to it.⁸ However, no record was kept of this workshop, in order to protect the privacy of the actors as they went through their exercises, delving deeply into their own responses to the war. Everyone who was part of the group was asked to contribute material, but it was left to the writers to finalise the play's script. Scriptwriting was made problematic by the fact that in the first instance scriptwriter Charles Wood was supposed to turn the material arising from the rehearsals into a proper script. Wood, however, left in order to work on Richard Lester's *How I Won the War* (UK, 1967) in Germany, featuring John Lennon. This left Brook without a proper scriptwriter, and improvisation dominated the process all the more. Eventually, Denis Cannan—who co-wrote the screenplay to *The Beggar's Opera* (UK, 1953) with Brook—joined the team, leading to some schisms: coming from a slightly earlier generation, Cannan and Brook were disdainful of popular culture, while poet Adrian Mitchell and many of the actors wished to incorporate aspects of popular music and culture into the performance.⁹

Eventually, the material that was deemed usable was divided into two acts: the first act dramatised the effect that the conflict had on the characters' everyday lives; the second act presented the internal thought processes of the players and the politics of Viet Nam. Once this structure was formulated, State censorship became an issue once the script was sent to the Lord Chamberlain's office (from 1737 to 1968, under the 'Licensing



Act 1737' and the 'Theatre Act 1843', the Lord Chamberlain was responsible for censoring plays in London, the City of Westminster). When the Lord Chamberlain read the script, he called the head of the RSC, Peter Hall, to tell him the play was "bestial, anti-American and Communist."¹⁰ The Lord Chamberlain then argued that he should do whatever in his power to make sure that the play is not produced. Only when Hall threatened to pull the season at Stratford-Upon-Avon, did the Lord Chamberlain relent, but promised that cuts would be made. Negotiations went on for quite a while. The backdrop of this negotiation was fraught: on the one hand, the Wilson government was considering abolishing the Lord Chamberlain's oversight of the theatre, and so the outright banning of the play would seem incongruous. On the other hand, the Lord Chamberlain was concerned enough about the play to contact the British Foreign Office, worrying that *US* would hurt Britain's 'special relationship' with the U.S.¹¹

With the imminent demise of State censorship on the horizon, the play opened at the Aldwych (one of the two RSC theatres) on October 13, 1967, ran for fifty performances, mostly to a full house, and was greeted with a wide variety of responses, both positive and negative (including a positive analysis by Jean-Paul Sartre, even though he never saw the performance).¹² After the play's run concluded, Brook and the RSC decided to produce a film version of the work. Yet *Tell Me Lies* is not an adaptation in the traditional sense of the term; it is far more like a re-imagining of the theatrical production into a semi-documentary cinematic form.

Tell Me Lies: Missing in Action

While many films fall through the cracks of cinema history, not many truly controversial ones do. This is one of the many reasons that *Tell Me Lies* is an anomaly. While Brook's other cinematic works such as *Lord of the Flies* (UK, 1963), *Marat/Sade* (UK, 1966) and *King Lear* (UK, 1971) are often quite rightly recognised as seminal texts of 1960s cinema, *Tell Me Lies* is left by the wayside in a seemingly arbitrary manner. The reason *Tell Me Lies* is elided has a great deal to do with the fact that it was one of the first English-language films to be critical of America's presence in Viet Nam. In a similar manner—however inconceivable given the current political and cultural context—a British film critical of the United States' actions in Iraq would have been marginalised in 2003. Indeed, the film was unable to obtain traditional sources of funding, and so seventy individuals from the United States financed it. As Michael Billington noted in 2003 in regards to the play *US*, on which *Tell Me Lies* is based: "Could it, or something like it, happen now? As we sleepwalk towards a possible war with Iraq, can you imagine the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National being cleared for a specially created show that put the conflict in context?"¹³ No plays were forthcoming, but, as if by way of response, Adrian Mitchell, whose poem "To whom it may concern" is set to music as the opening song of *Tell Me Lies*, and from which the film draws its title, restaged his reading of the poem (made famous by his performance of it in 1965, on a bill with Allen Ginsberg at the Royal Albert Hall) by slightly re-writing the lines to the poem, which originally concluded:

From the stage production of *US*



You put your bombers in,
you put your conscience out,
You take the human being
and you twist it all about
So scrub my skin with women
Chain my tongue with whisky
Stuff my nose with garlic
Coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Viet Nam¹⁴

Mitchell revisited the poem as the second Gulf War loomed and began performing it again. He first did this at an anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square on October 13, 2001, then on November 14, 2003 at an anti-war poetry performance at the Bloomsbury Theatre in London, and finally at a Stop Bush rally again in Trafalgar Square on November 23, 2003. The new, revised poem now had a new addendum:

Tell me lies about the war
Tell me lies about Afghanistan
Tell me lies about Palestine
Tell me lies about Cuba
Tell me lies
O tell me pretty little lies
Tell me lies about Iraq!

Mitchell himself was quite prescient about Vietnam, and Britain's role in it and future wars. He remarked in a 1968 interview: "[...] I don't think they'll [British youth] have to fight in Vietnam. But they're going to have to fight a white man's war, which is what this whole thing is—what this war is. And it's leading up to a global white man's war, eventually, maybe twenty, thirty years away if we're lucky."¹⁵ Certainly, this is an apt description of Bush and Blair's 'war on terror' and the global implications of the current white man's war against radical Islam. It goes without saying, by "if we're lucky," Mitchell means that thirty years is better than twenty, but the war is nevertheless inevitable.

Agitprop poetry, Brechtian distancing and the anti-war movement were not the only influences on Brook's work. On an aesthetic level, *Tell Me Lies* fits quite comfortably beside contemporaneous works such as Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (France, 1967) and the French omnibus film co-ordinated by Chris Marker, *Loin du Vietnam* (France, 1967). For instance, in Godard's contribution to *Loin du Vietnam*, "Caméra-oeil", the filmmaker sits by a Mitchell camera, and ruminates on wanting to make a film about the war and then realising the limits of representation

of the events in Viet Nam, stating: "I wanted to show everything, defoliation, etc. [...] But we are far away, so the best we can do is make films—let Vietnam invade us—come in to our everyday lives, instead of invading Vietnam with our own sensibilities. Instead of our invading them with a generosity we impose, we should let them invade us and see what happens."¹⁶ In many ways, this is also the philosophy that lies behind Brook's work.

Tell Me Lies also goes far beyond the Brechtian strategies found in the other key self-reflexive film of 1960s British cinema: Lindsey Anderson's *If...* (UK, 1968). Yet, with its subject matter and its Brechtian aesthetic challenging some of the dominant paradigms of 1960s British cinema—most notably those of the social realism of the 'kitchen sink' films—*Tell Me Lies* is a film largely forgotten today, never discussed within the canon of British cinema, and rarely examined as an early Viet Nam film, the conflict to which it is an impassioned response. The only other British filmmaker of note engaging in a similar political form of cinematic self-reflexivity at the time was Peter Watkins, whose film *The War Game* (UK, 1967) was banned by the BBC upon its completion. It is also of note that *Tell Me Lies* is not solely elided in British film historiographies: while journals such as *Screen* and *New Left Review* were championing the radical possibilities of Brechtian aesthetics in the early 1970s, *Tell Me Lies* was left out of the pantheon of celebrated Brechtian films in this newly formed canon.¹⁷

For a film now cloaked in utter obscurity, it is all the more remarkable that *Tell Me Lies* includes appearances by Glenda Jackson, Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Scofield, alongside the likes of former 'angry young man' Kingsley Amis, SNCC and Black Panther activist Stokely Carmichael (who predicts the imminent demise of the White race), Beat poet Allen Ginsburg, British MPs Reginald Paget and Tom Driberg and *Evening Standard* editor Peregrine Worthington. The film is part fiction, part documentary, and follows the lives of a group of Londoners trying to come to terms with Viet Nam and how to properly protest the war in such a way that goes beyond the mere symbols of protest. The film postulates a series of questions through the use of different modes of address. Mark (Mark Jones), a young leftist radical, tries to imagine how a Buddhist monk could immolate himself in protest against Viet Nam. He asks his partner Pauline (Pauline Munro): "Is there anything we care about so much that we'd be willing to burn ourselves?" Glenda (Glenda Jackson), a Maoist, gives lectures and appears as an almost unconscious voice for Mark and Pauline, reading quotes from Mao's little red book of quotations between them as they sleep, such as: "A revolution is not a tea party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another."¹⁸ The political trajectory of these characters is intercut with songs, skits and restagings of protests, demonstrations and acts of resistance undertaken against the United States' presence in South East Asia. For instance, the story of Norman Morrison is recreated in black and white, *cinéma vérité* style, with the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square standing in for the Pentagon (Morrison, a

Quaker, immolated himself on the steps of the Pentagon in protest against the war—this event is also examined in *Loin de Vietnam*). Found footage of a Buddhist Monk immolating himself in front of an Exxon station in Viet Nam is shown silently, while the Londoners wonder if such an act would be of political value in Britain. Songs—remarkably, a soundtrack album was released on the Gre-Gar label—include the story of Barry Bondhus, who dumped two buckets of human shit into the files at his draft board as an act of protest. Along with the fictional elements, *Tell Me Lies* includes debates between some of the main characters and real-life figures such as Amis and Carmichael (which is perhaps one of the most bizarre juxtapositions in British film history) while attending a semi-documentary party; the two interviews are split by a musical number called "Zapping the Cong," a song and dance number about Americans torturing and killing the Viet Cong. *Tell Me Lies* can therefore be seen as a catalogue of ways in which to protest, questioning both film form and modes of political action in the process. But despite this catalogue, the film does not have an answer as to how to bring an end to the conflict, or how to represent it without "telling lies."

Tell Me Lies is sub-titled *A Film About London*—the film is about the British capital in a similar way that Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (France, 1966) is about Paris—and it is the actions and activities in London, not Viet Nam, that are the film's true subject. As such, the film approaches the question of Viet Nam from a number of different points of view, reflecting the diverse responses that Londoners had to the war. *Tell Me Lies* follows the characters as they struggle through the representations of Viet Nam that surround them and try to make sense of the quandaries posed by mass-mediated images of carnage and destruction. Furthermore, they attempt to discuss the 'proper' way for a Londoner to engage in political action.

As the saturated media coverage of Viet Nam turned the conflict into the first mass-mediated war, *Tell Me Lies* raised the question of how one responds to the images of death and atrocity. Are images of burnt children simply responding to an unspoken voyeuristic pleasure? Can other, more gruesome images be invoked in order to counteract both the pleasure and distancing one feels when viewing these images? Writing on the film in 1970, Peter Ohlin, one of the few who paid any serious critical attention to the film, noted:

Tell Me Lies [...] distrusts itself to the nth degree. The title seems to refer to the conflicting claims on the individual made by the need for truth and the simultaneous need for victory in a just cause (which might justify lies to obtain the end result desired). Throughout the film two characters keep staring at the audience as if it were the film projected and wondering if this is a semi-documentary fiction film or a semi-fictional documentary. [...] *Tell Me Lies* finds itself caught in the trap between on the one hand its conviction of the destructive distortions of all communications media, and on the other, the necessity to act and to use distortive techniques to understand this need for action.¹⁹

Brook's film doesn't solve these quandaries as much as attempt to address the dubious information provided by mediated images themselves. He does this by deploying a number of different aesthetic strategies, combining the musical, found footage, pseudo-cinéma vérité, interviews, restagings, archival footage and Brechtian devices. At the same time, the film considers whether the use of more brutal and propagandistic images than those emerging from the dominant media are needed in order to mobilise people against the war. To this extent, *Tell Me Lies* sets up an opposition that cannot be resolved within the film itself. These same questions permeate debates about objectivity and the media, on both the left and the right, today. The ethics, for instance, of showing photographs of dead American soldiers or abused Iraqi men at Abu Graib prison, raise similar issues.

Tell Me Lies cannot only be seen as an anti-American rant (as it was received at the time of its release) but also as a self-reflexive examination of the hypocrisies and contradictions of the emerging leftist middle-class. Yet this critique is in some ways limiting, as all protest in the UK is reduced to middle-class piety. As the review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* notes: "[*Tell Me Lies*] denounces the middle-class, garden party atmosphere of British protest yet it limits its scrutiny to middle-class protesters in N.W.3, making no mention of, for instance, trade union attitudes to the Vietnam war."²⁰ Perhaps Brook confines his critique to the middle-class of London, as this is both where his actors and his audience come from. As Nicolas De Jongh notes, the audience for the RSC were not "[...] sinister left-wingers, protesting hippies and peaceniks [...]. In fact the people attending RSC performances tended to be liberal, young and middle-class."²¹ This caveat aside, *Tell Me Lies* questions almost all attempts at political engagement. However, the film does not dismiss them out of hand; instead *Tell Me Lies* foregrounds the tensions that lie at the heart of middle-class rebellion. Despite this critique not of

only the U.S., but also of Britain, *Tell Me Lies*' reception in the United States was incredibly hostile—The *Christian Science Monitor* labelled the film "bad taste amounting to obscenity"²² and the film was savagely reviewed by *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Variety* and The *New York Times*—even though other films emerging from the continent and from the US itself were lauded for many of the same aesthetic choices, albeit without the scathing indictment of the War which laid at the heart of Brook's film (the British trade journals *Kiné-Weekly* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* were critical but more supportive).²³ Yet, despite the self-conscious critique of the impotence of aspects of the New Left, it is the attacks on the United States that lead to the film's problems: the film was labelled anti-American and pro-Viet Nam. Yet, as Brook's noted as he toured the U.S. with the film, it is important to analyse what the label anti-American means in this context: "[critics] call the film anti-Viet Nam, and at first this surprised me until I realised that anti-Viet Nam is a telescoped form of 'anti-the-war-in-Viet Nam'. Anti-Viet Nam in fact means pro-Viet Nam. It is the same as anti-American—it is a telescoped phrase that should read 'anti-the-wanton-destruction-of-the-American-ideal'. It means pro-America."²⁴ One only needs to look at the 'War on Terror', the United States' 'you're with us or against us' stance towards the UN and European Union in 2003, George W. Bush's Patriot Act, the 2004 and 2008 election campaigns, Sarah Palin's 'real America' comments and the utter absurdity of 'Freedom Fries' to see the similarities between media coverage of Viet Nam and the present day.²⁵

In a similar manner to the rightist critique launched against Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the question of 'objectivity' plagued the American release of *Tell Me Lies*. Brook's film was criticised because it did not conform to the 'rules of television news'—it was not 'objective'—and this was substantiated by claims that as it did not show the 'atrocities of the Viet Cong'. Therefore, the film was dismissed as one-sided (conveniently for-



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getting the kind of outrage provoked by any sympathetic portrayal of the Viet Cong in mainstream, 'objective' American media—the on-going attacks on 'Hanoi' Jane Fonda almost forty years later being the most salient example of this kind of backlash). The fury raised by Brook's aesthetic choices elided some of the other voices in the film. Along with the aforementioned presence of Amis, a British actor playing a representative from the American Embassy puts forth the American, anti-Communist point of view across quite forcefully:

I want you to understand very clearly just what it is you are protesting about when you demonstrate outside our embassy. Most of your protests are based on a misunderstanding of what this war is about. It's really very simple. Vietnam is, at this moment, the focal point of a great power struggle. We think our way of life is better than that of the communists. Believing this, we cannot allow the communists to take over South Vietnam. It is possible to make a moral protest against our activities. You may say that it's wrong for two great powers to be killing innocent people. But if you say that, you are, in effect, condemning everything on which civilised societies have been based for the past two thousand years. History is the story of power struggles. Those engaged in those struggles have always believed they were right. The only morality lies in gaining your ends while inflicting as little suffering as possible. America is the most powerful nation in the history of the world. We think that we're using our overwhelming power with more restraint than any other nation in the history of the world. This is the essence of our moral case.²⁶

Tell Me Lies, however, is not simply an anti-war film. Brook's film argues for pacifism, for class struggle and revolution, and for more Viet Nams, here implicitly following the argument put forth by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Mao's *Quotations*, among others at the forefront of third world liberation. Furthermore, while Amis's rant does represent the view that the Viet Cong are savage Communists, other points of view—and the radical Brechtian aesthetics deployed by Brook—undercut this. It is this undercutting to which the American reviewers often objected.

Along these lines, it is interesting to see what was kept out of the film. In the play, Glenda Jackson makes an impassioned plea for revolution and war (its inclusion was contested by many partaking in the play), which is edited substantially and put into the mouth of a middle-aged man in *Tell Me Lies*. The first part of her diatribe in the play, which is excised from the film, reads as follows, and is eerily prescient:

So you end the war in Vietnam. Where's the next one? Thailand, Chile, Alabama? The things that will be needed are all ready in some carefully camouflaged quartermaster's store. The wire, the rope, the gas, the cardboard boxes they use for coffins in

emergencies. I WANT IT TO GET WORSE! I want it to come HERE! I want to see it in an English house, among the floral chintzes and the school blazers and the dog leads hanging in the hall. I would like us to be tested. I would like a fugitive to run to our doors and say hide me—and know if we hid him we might get shot and if we turned him away we would have to remember that forever. I would like to know which of my nice well-meaning acquaintances would collaborate, which would betray, which would talk first under torture—and which would become a torturer. I would like to smell the running bowels of fear, over the English Sunday morning smell of gin and the roasting joint, and hyacinth. I would like to see an English dog playing on an English lawn with part of a burned hand. I would like to see a gas grenade go off at an English flower show, and nice English ladies crawling in each others' sick. And all this I would like to be photographed and filmed so that someone a long way off, safe in his chair, could watch us in our indignity!

Here, Brook uses violent imagery to cut to the heart of the question of voyeurism and complicity. It is easy to condemn violence seen at a distance; one can easily adopt a stance of moral superiority to actions taken against 'others'. And yet, the response to violence and violent actions changes dramatically when the acts are no longer mediated through images; the American response to September 11, 2001 a little over thirty years later, speaks to these differences and offers answers to some of the questions posed in the monologue above. Images of dancing, celebrating Palestinians offended American viewers after the Twin Towers attack; Americans could not comprehend such a callous, 'barbarous' act. Yet most did not see that the West's fascination with the bombing of Bagdad during Gulf War *Mach I* amounted to the same kind of distanced spectatorship, which disregarded death in a celebration of military power. The following monologue is then put in the mouth of a middle-aged man in *Tell Me Lies* as Jackson watches on (although this is part of her speech as the Maoist character in the play itself):

Everyone who doesn't care what goes on—so long as it's out of sight—wants it to go on; because if it's being done to someone else, they think it won't be done to them; and if someone else is doing it, that's better than doing it yourself. Every man whose spirit is dying, wants it to go on, because that sort of dying is better if everyone else dies with you. Everyone longing for the day of judgement—wants it to go on. Everyone who wants it to be changed, and can't change—wants it to go on. It doesn't matter that the world will be ash—if your life is ash, you'll want it to go on. And that is why it goes on. And why it will get worse. And why the catastrophe will come. I want it. You want it. They want it. Like lust, it goes on because we want it. And as with lust, we suspect most of all those who shout loudest, "No!"²⁷

Of interest here is the relationship between voyeurism, political commitment and imagination. The speech foregrounds the mostly unspoken pleasure that the spectator has watching images of mass destruction. As Michael Ignatieff writes about war (in this case, the war in Kosovo, but applicable across the board in terms of contemporary warfare although, quite egregiously, he himself went on to support the Iraq war): "War affords the pleasure of the spectacle, with the added thrill that it is real for someone, but not, happily, for the spectator."²⁸ Viet Nam can be seen as the beginning of this technological distancing, paradoxically taking place at the same time when television images of the war in South East Asia seemed their most 'real'. Along these lines, Thomas Elsaesser notes that: "Even the war in Viet Nam seems in retrospect to have been on both sides a battle for the control of enemy territory only in order to produce for the world at large images of such horror and fascination as might transgress the limits of imagination itself."²⁹ Perhaps this is why silence, and the imagination not of the filmmakers but the audience, plays such an important role at the conclusion of both *US*—where the actors stop and stare at the audience for minutes on end, after realising a box full of butterflies, then immolating one (one that is, unbeknownst to the audience, made of paper)—and *Tell Me Lies*—where Mark shows his friend Bob (Robert Langdon Lloyd) an image of an unspecified atrocity and asks how long he could stare at the image without losing interest, and how long it would take if 'it' walked through the door and the audience stares at the door until the film fades to white—infuriated audiences who were not provided with closure or answers. In the end, *Tell Me Lies* raises far more questions than it answers, but in doing so asks why more questions are not typically asked about the representations that surround and bombard us. As a forgotten, neglected film, it nevertheless clearly resonates with our present condition.

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Notes

- 1 Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre", *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964): 201.
- 2 The 'War on a Concept' is not a totally new idea, as it can easily be traced back to the 'War on Drugs'. It's perhaps needless to say that the 'War on Drugs' was about as successful as the current 'War on Terror'.
- 3 Along with Virilio's seminal book *War and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1989), the literature on this topic is quite vast. Recent books of interest include Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002); Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (London: Penguin, 2000), Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera* (New York: Grove Press, 2005) and Michael Moore, ed. *The Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).
- 4 Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (New York, Grove Press, 1961): 18.
- 5 Peter Brook, "The Beck Connection" in Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration* (London: Methuen, 1987): 27.
- 6 Thomas Elsaesser, "From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism: Bertolt

Brecht and Contemporary Film" in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, eds., *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 179. In many ways, Brecht's concept of distancing, his notion of the 'gesture' and of acting as quotation are best kept alive in the cinema in the practices of found footage filmmakers.

- 7 Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 13.
- 8 See Jerzy Grotowski, "Towards a Poor Theatre" in Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1968): 15-25.
- 9 Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, "Zapping the Conscience: *US*" in Hunt and Reeves, *Peter Brook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 98-99.
- 10 Cited in Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, "Zapping the Conscience: *US*" in Hunt and Reeves, *Peter Brook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 104.
- 11 For a full account of the trials of the RSC to get *US* approved—and for a detailed account of the role of the Lord Chamberlain more generally in the 20th century—see Nicolas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000): 148-155.
- 12 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Myth and Reality in the Theatre" in Michel Contat and Michael Rybalka, eds., *Sartre on Theatre* (London: Quartet Books, 1976): 135-137.
- 13 Michael Billington, "Goodbye to All That", *Guardian* 9 January 2003.
- 14 Adrian Mitchell, "To Whom It May Concern (Tell Me Lies About Viet Nam)" in Mitchell, *Heart on the Left: Poems 1953-1984* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997): 292-293.
- 15 Cited in Laurence Coupe, "'Tell Me Lies About Vietnam': English Poetry and the American War" in Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh, eds., *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of War* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press: 1992): 172.
- 16 Cited in James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 197.
- 17 The major studies of British cinema also ignore the film. See, for instance, Charles Barr, ed., *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986); Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, eds. *British Cinema: Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Robert Murphy, ed. *The British Cinema Book*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 2001). This absence is particularly telling as the trajectory of British national film studies over the last ten years has been based on recuperating a plethora of previously ignored films, many of dubious quality.
- 18 Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: Praeger, 1968): 6-7.
- 19 Peter Ohlin, *Colours/Dreams/Shadows: The Narrative Crisis in Self-Reflexive Film, 1960-1970* (Montréal: n.p., 1970): 114.
- 20 "Tell Me Lies," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 35.411 (1968): 63.
- 21 Nicolas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000): 151-152.
- 22 Cited in Peter Brook, "Vietnam Film Rouses American Anger—And Fantasy" in Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 212.
- 23 See "Tell Me Lies," *Kiné-Weekly* 3150.24 (1968): 12 and "Tell Me Lies," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 35.411 (1968): 63.
- 24 In a contemporary context, both Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky make similar points about the way in which their criticism of the United States is received in a post-September 11 context. See Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001).
- 25 The serious ethical and political problems with this stand are outlined in Stanley Fish, "Can Postmodernism Condemn Terror?" *The Responsive Community* 12.3 (2002): 27-31. On a more frivolous note, French Fries originate in Belgium, making the 'Freedom' Fries protest all the more inane.
- 26 Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 182.
- 27 Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 183.
- 28 Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (London, Penguin, 2000): 191.
- 29 Thomas Elsaesser, "From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film" in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, eds., *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*

Deciphering *Lust, Caution*

ALICE SHIH

Lust, Caution (*Se, Jie*), the film which took the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2007, was director Ang Lee's return to Asian filmmaking after *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). After receiving the Oscar for *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005, Lee became a hot property in Hollywood but he chose to return to Asia for his follow-up. That was a surprise to some Americans, but the reported themes of sex and violence in this upcoming film were the biggest surprise of all. Lee's previous works were considered by most to be mild and restrained and a departure from his previous style would be "out of character".

"I was just following the story," Lee said when I asked him why. "People consider me a gentle character, as reflected in the sentiment of my previous works; but I found that I had used up everything on the outer surface of my temperament, so I decided to go deeper inside of myself to explore. It took courage to express another side of me, to allow it to surface. I struggled when I was making this film, while I was at ease in my other films. I considered this exploration another way to expose real emotions. If I kept doing things that were easy, I wouldn't be trying my best. So I decided that it was time to face my darker side. I can sincerely express real emotions this way. I guess everybody has their dark side which no one wants others to know about. Yet, if I kept repeating myself, I would find it boring, like clockwork. Another important factor was Eileen Chang's inspiring novella; it sparked my creativity and pushed me to new ideas. So I boldly accepted the challenge."

Eileen Chang's Novella *Se, Jie* was first published in Taiwan in 1978. The story was set in the 1940's and it was considered a very personal piece for the author, as Eileen was once married to Hu Lancheng, a Japanese collaborator in wartime China. Some report-

ed that the writing process was so painful that it took her more than twenty years to finish this story. The piece is less than thirty pages in length, gripping and powerful, yet not rich in details. It seemed that the author wanted the readers to fill in the details themselves, not because she did not do her research well, but because certain mistakes or regrets were better left unsaid when they were already perceived.

Lee and his screenwriting team ended up filling in a lot of the details as motivations are needed in the narrative structure of a film. "You have to be prepared that the public, especially Eileen Chang's fans, will have a lot of negative comments whenever you do any of her adaptations. Her words are impossible... Words are words and a film is a film," Lee explained. "Making a movie doesn't mean that we are doing an interpretation of the words; I'm not trying to put the words on the screen. I kept telling my writing team that the novella was just the beginning, not an unchangeable end point. As you can tell from reading the book, it reads like a fantasy in some places. Using characters to play out the words in a literary text that is not so logical doesn't work. You will encounter a lot of problems if you do it this way. A film has its own structure."

The writers, Wang Huijing and James Schamus, enriched the original story with their imagina-



tion, filling in lots of gaps in the characters' maturation, which is like a signature stamp in all Ang Lee's films. They brought to the screen a rich depiction of the characters' gradual loss of innocence, both for the women and the men, which was absent from Chang's text. Our protagonist Wong Chia Chi, played by Tang Wei, was still an up-and-coming university student performer when her friend persuaded her to try smoking, saying that it would help her with her on stage performance. Scenes later, after she was deeply involved in the plot to kill Yee, she is seen offering her friend her own packet of cigarettes and smoking like a pro. These character-revealing details were put in by the team to help the audience understand the changes in our characters.

A major scene which depicted graphic violence was also written in to bridge an important gap in the story, and that was the scene when Tsao, played by Chin Kar Lok, came to the students' apartment after Yee's departure. He exposed their scheme and was attacked. The group managed to pin him down and he was not a threat to them anymore at that moment. Yet Kuang, played by Wang Leehom, raging with hatred at this traitor, could not forego this opportunity to kill a spy and started stabbing him. The other males in the group lost their humanity and joined in this frenzy. This explicit scene was a completely new creation for the screen. "That killing scene was actually added in at a later stage, at the final few drafts," Lee said. "This scene is very important to me. Other members of the group, like Kuang, weren't being depicted much in the plot. The girl has her moment of loss of innocence, so do the boys. They kill to prove their manhood, as if it was their coming-of-age ritual."

The three-year gap between the fall of the Hong Kong operation and its resumption in Shanghai is also missing in the novella. "I think that it is necessary for us to journey through this period with Wong after she sacrificed her virginity for nothing when Yee left Hong Kong in a hurry," Lee recalled. "I found that the character of Wong carried a lot of Eileen Chang herself in it—her point of view about love, her belief in love and the way she loved. I read her other books and I can get a sense of how she felt and how she carried herself in these three years. Yet, a low point in the middle of the movie is uninteresting. You need to shake and wake the audience at this point. How she made it through this period is important for the audience as we can then understand why she would take her next steps. In order to make a good film, you have to take elements that are interesting and expand them. Otherwise, it wouldn't be possible for me to hold my head up in front of Eileen Chang." Lee has proved himself very worthy in enriching the story with all kinds of visual details, and through these details, viewers are given more clues to the story.

"But if you pay attention, nothing is trivial," said Mr. Yee to Mak Tai Tai. This line pretty much describes my experience when I was watching *Lust, Caution*. Lee has chosen to delight viewers who pay attention to both the visuals and the audio, as the way to appreciate this film is certainly by discovering how the visual element compliments what is missing in the audio, or points up the mismatch between the two. The dialogue, which sometimes contradicts the action on screen, uncovers the hidden layers of deception and adds depth and mystery. The visual design conveys a lot of information and back-story to the viewer without saying a word. Hence, a secret exchange happens between the

director and the more sophisticated members of the audience, and these added bonuses are not picked up by those who do not pay enough attention.

Mainstream commercial films and most TV production nowadays are produced to please an audience who can follow the story without paying much attention. What you hear the characters say mostly matches their action on screen. Viewers usually end up seeing talking heads telling others exactly what they are doing. People watching a show can easily multi-task, like text-messaging on their blackberries in theatres. Housewives who are doing the dishes are still able to follow the plot for most of the films produced these days. Fortunately, *Lust, Caution*, is not one of these films.

Listening to the dialogue, one would never suspect that Mrs. Yee, played by Joan Chen, has a clue that Wong (Mak Tai Tai) is having an affair with her husband. She speaks to Mak ever so caringly and is so friendly, she even invites Mak to live in their house. Not one line in the whole script expresses jealousy or anger. Yet viewers can see the fire in her eyes when she looks, glances or gazes at Mak. By inviting Mak to play mahjong and even to live with her, viewers can tell that Mrs. Yee is using the tactic of "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer." She does have one line in the script when she tells Mak and Yee to back off, and that is at the breakfast table when she says that Mr. Yee's feet are cold at night and he needs a herbal supplement. She is trying to make Mak understand that she is still sharing her husband's bed and Mak should wise up. Mrs. Yee did it in such a mild and civil manner that some of the audience did not pick up this clue.

"My character as Mrs. Yee is not particularly likeable as this story is about Yee and Mak," Joan smiled. "I was trying to give this wife some charm, grace and humour. Young people may not know how to handle her predicament, but she has been through a lot and nothing much could make her lose control. She also sees beyond her relationship with him on a purely emotional level, understanding that there is more than just love and affection in a relationship." Her behaviour, atypical for the Western world, was very typical at the time for Chinese housewives who had unfaithful husbands. The mild and forbearing virtue of Chinese women is on full display in this scenario, except that she was not love-sick like Madame Butterfly; she swallowed her pride to avoid scandal. In Chinese society, nothing could be worse than losing face and becoming the laughing stock of your social circle. The stakes are high and she could lose even more if that happened.

There are other elements in the film which are inherently Chinese, even the title. "*Lust, Caution*" is a well-translated English title from the original Chinese text "*Se, Jie*", with "*Lust*" meaning "*Se*" and "*Caution*" meaning "*Jie*", but the original Chinese characters of "*Se*" and "*Jie*" carry additional meaning. "*Se*", apart from meaning "*lust*", also means "*colour*", and "*Jie*" is constantly mentioned throughout the story as it literally means "*ring*". The object which was discussed in the very first scene, and also brought about the downfall of our heroine at the end, is the diamond ring, which symbolizes a lifetime of happiness in marriage for most women. The duality of the meaning of the title gives the story an added dimension.

There are so many details that are inherently Chinese in this film, that it is hard for a worldwide audience to appreciate it fully.

For example, part of the story is told through mahjong tactics. Wong lost a lot of money as she could not concentrate on her mahjong tiles, while upholding her assumed identity of Mak. For Mrs. Yee and the other players, mahjong was not about winning money but a hobby to pass the time and share hot gossip. Mrs. Yee was always kind and accommodating to Mak on the surface, but she was shrewd and merciless when she played the game. She knew what tiles Mak wanted, but she would not release them when they were in her possession. She was always in control, judging by the way she played, until Mr. Yee came on board.

Mr. Yee, played by Tony Chiu Wai Leung, was also a mahjong pro. He happened to be sitting to the left of Mak, which was a crucial position as he would have his turn to draw and discard in the round before Mak, who would then be in a position to "eat up (Chi)", or benefit from what he discarded to create a meld of a sequence of three. He knew Mak wanted "Circle" tiles and discarded a "7 Circle". Mak responded by calling "Chi", yet Mrs. Yee from across the table called "Pong", which declared her priority to acquire that "7 Circle" tile, as she wanted it for a meld of three of a kind. Mak was disappointed, but not for long, for when the next round came, Mr. Yee discarded another "7 Circle" and this time Mak with delight "Chi"ed it with no rival. It is very unusual for someone to discard tiles that are in pairs. In this case, Mr. Yee clearly possessed a pair of "7 Circles" and he was giving them up to help Mak. When Mak managed to win this hand with Mr. Yee's continuous supply of "Circle" tiles, Mrs. Yee queried why he would play his hand the way he did. Thus we see in this scene the drama of rivalry and favouritism built, not on words, but through mahjong tactics.

The character of Mr. Yee is also complex. His job as the secret spy chief for the Japanese invader made him a ruthless and threatening figure. He was stone cold on the outside, but there were slips here and there that showed he might still have some redeeming qualities. When a note was given to Mak which marked "2B" as the location of their first date in Shanghai, the likeness of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen was printed on the top right-hand corner of the notepad. The national hero's picture was also hung on the wall of Yee's study, which revealed the respect that Yee had for the honourable Dr. Sun as the father of the Chinese nation. If he was a heartless traitor of his own people, he would have had the Japanese Emperor on the wall instead. The set design serves as a silent narrator throughout this film. Most of the time, the director does not say what kind of location the characters are in, but the viewers can find the clues on the screen.

Before the scene of the two main characters' first sexual encounter, Yee had his driver drop Mak off outside a building, and asked her to go up to "2B". Mak had no clue where she was. Was it a hotel or Yee's secret apartment? No information was available. Mak slowly entered, and stopped in front of some furniture. She touched the table top and found it dusty, the place looked like it had been empty for a while, more like an abandoned apartment than a hotel. On the wall behind Mak, above the dusty table, an unknown family picture of four was hung. Who would leave their family picture still hanging on the wall when they moved away, unless they had to leave in a hurry, or maybe the family were taken away by force and they were unable to bring anything along. Then, how did Yee manage to gain access to this abandoned apartment

for his personal use? No words were used here, but the set gave us a hint that Yee had probably arrested this family and was able to confiscate their property for his own use. The set tells you what kind of a person he was.

Another scene where the set does the talking was when the group of students were still in Hong Kong. Kuang was entertaining Tsao, hoping that this traitor would hook them up with Yee. They were feasting and drinking with some women. It looked like a restaurant, but when Kuang stepped out of the building to meet his friends, we saw that there were well-dressed women standing aimlessly by the entrance with empty looks in their eyes and cigarettes in their hands. Could they be prostitutes waiting for a customer? When the camera tilts up to the second floor, we see the shadow of a woman, alone by the window, fanning herself, and we know at that instant that this is indeed a brothel!

Ang Lee is a master of emotional story-telling. He is particularly successful in showing the change in his characters' emotions, which in turn propels the narrative forward. Through the changes in his characters, the story progresses logically. For Wong Chia Chi, who pretended to be Mak Tai Tai, her journey was a sad case of extreme method acting. She had to be able to fool her own self, otherwise she would not be able to fool such a suspicious person as Mr. Yee. By blurring the character that she had to play and her real identity, she toed a dangerous line and slipped over to the wrong side. Her gradual descent was evident in the sequential sex scenes, as the expression on her face gradually shifted from pure pain at the beginning, to the appreciation of painful pleasure by the end of the third exchange. She wanted the team to kill Yee as soon as possible, as she could sense that she was falling deeper and deeper in love with the enemy.

Art indeed imitates life, as the inability of actors to pull themselves out of a character is evident everywhere, like renowned actors Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman and in this film, Tony Chiu Wai Leung. "The characters that I portray always affect my private life. I will gradually leave that character when the shoot is over. That is part of my profession. I have been like this for the past twenty-five years. It was good that I had another character lined up after *Lust, Caution* and I could shift towards the new character faster. That helped me leave the character more easily. When I was doing Wong Kar Wai's films, there were times when I couldn't leave the characters for a few years. I would have to play the soundtrack of the movie on a sleepless night to get closer to that character again, as I missed him so much. I guess this is how it is for actors. Usually the deeper you get into the character, the longer it takes you to leave."

A good film also stays with the viewers: the more thought-provoking the film, the longer it stays. For a film so rich in cinematic language, superb performances and meticulous directorial execution, revisiting *Lust, Caution* would be a delight, as the audience will be able to pick up previously undiscovered details, time after time.

Alice Shih is a Toronto-based film journalist, and a board member of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. She is a frequent contributor for *CineAction* and *POV*. Her critique on films can also be heard on Fairchild Radio, the national Chinese radio broadcaster in Canada. She specializes in world films, especially films from Asia, the Asian diaspora and Canada.

On The Road to Renewed Relevance

JACQUES TATI'S *TRAFIC*

DAN LALANDE

Even among Tati-philes, it is classified, at best, a pleasant coda. But Jacques Tati's *Trafic*, back on the autoroute in the form of a stylish, 2 DVD set, finds itself again on the road to relevance, the product of a delirious political period of rising gas prices, environmental erosion, technological ubiquity, and insatiable consumerism—each a conspirator in the moral double-take being performed by our contemporary, car-crazed culture.



If *Les Vacances de Mr. Hulot* cleverly demonstrated that man's capacity for pleasure was suffering from increased constriction, and *Mon Oncle* poetically eulogized the folkway-fertile 'vieux cartier' that was its genetic genesis, *Trafic*, Tati's underrated ideological road movie, quietly adds that man, now metallically sealed off from the capacity for genuine experience, barely feels the loss any more. The little piece of Paris in which Hulot civilly revelled among stray dogs, sunshine-seeking songbirds and charmingly mischievous children isn't even a dot in the rear view mirror. Man has zipped passed it, along layers of oppressive overpasses, into a noisy, hermetic jungle, where mishaps, breakdowns and murmured moments of miscommunication populate the pathways of the planet as much as the steering wheel-sterilized nose pickers and yawners one finds behind the wheel.

By this time—the third appearance of Tati's trademark character—Hulot, too, is part of this absurdly progressive universe, a resigned recruit by way of his role as designer of an absurdly accessorized camper, created by the company for which he indifferently toils for an Amsterdam auto show.

Yes, the still recognizable Hulot, with his high-wire gait and bird-like movements, remains the perpetual outsider, facilitating the classic comic formula of the bumbling innocent set loose against a stuffy, functionary backdrop, but his newfound servility serves as a telling comment on the diminished role of the artist in an increasingly deracinated society, devalued by the silently unstoppable energies of industrialization, commerce and crass commercialism (as does a choice running gag on the awarding of free busts of famous artists by a gas station.)

The Hulot-designed camper fails to make it to the auto show on schedule, the victim of mounting motorway mousetraps. This simple, allegorical narrative would have been enough in and of itself to drive home Tati's point. But the painterly Tati, with his equation of film as wall-sized canvas, does not keep statements in the booty of linearity.

With his Sunday intellectual's bent for making his audiences work at least a little, Tati hides the tidbits of his thesis like Easter eggs. They are in the periodic montages of the people trapped in traffic, the frustrating lulls between the gags, the garbled cross-European overlapped by his anonymous human subjects; put together, what rolls off the assembly line is a silently subversive meditation on an urban fate in which human interaction is the delicate domain of happenstance. Even then, Tati adds, we're all much too lost in our own subjective rituals to appreciate the cosmic quirk.

If *Playtime*, the abstract epic released before this film that is considered Tati's masterwork, failed to register with the public, and *Trafic* remains considered, despite the much loved Hulot's return, just as much of a disappointment, the fault lies not in the subtext of these films but in the democratization of the gags; at the time of their production, Tati was still suffering the after effects of a car accident (inspiring *Trafic*?), seriously restricting his

onscreen abilities. Considered alongside his growing frustration over being kept in the straitjacket of Hulot, one can almost forgive the assignation of both films' wittiest moments to less experienced players. We laugh, but it is laughter cut to the quick by the realization that each gag would have been better performed by the master. Another consequence of this circumstance is *Trafic*'s periodic pedantry. While what was once said of Chaplin, that he made films great only by appearing in frame enough times, could never be said of the more directorially ambitious Tati, nevertheless, from *Playtime* onward, the man is seriously missed.

Such issues with his work, however, never appear to have bothered him. Tati, from the daughter-produced documentary that accompanies the DVD: "I think flaws are vital. They are part of total artistic freedom."

And that, with *Trafic*, is exactly what we get: the purest expression of an artist who has negotiated the slippery roads of critical acclaim, international success, falls from box office grace and journalistic indifference; finally, he finds beyond those bumptious byways a vagary-free expanse where he is free to leave impressions big or small, as is his wont, for the few still devoted to his travails who might appreciate them.

Small wonder then that in *Trafic*, much more than in his other films, Tati takes all the time he wishes setting up a gag. The longer the set up, in fact, the funnier the joke: the long, lonely walk with the empty gas can along the highway—until a fellow traveler, identical gas can in tow, appears across the road... the prolonged crawl up the ivy of the country home, until at last the doorstep lovers appear, to have their midnight kiss disrupted by the falling pocket change of the suspended Hulot... the trio of references to the moon landing—as Tati looks to a heaven just as archly mechanized as his conception of life on earth; even in the netherworld, he conjoins, there is no escape!—until the slo-mo emulation of the astronauts' gestures by a pair of playful mechanics.

And for all that he has comically endured, what does Hulot, at the conclusion of *Trafic*, get? Fired, of course, in true comic film fashion, for failing to fulfil his professional duties. Predictably, there is no visible reaction, no close-up or other vehicle to bridge the gap between protagonist and audience; just a Keatonesque sight gag—a walk, under open umbrella, against a sea of same, washing Hulot back to the sidewalk shore—and a closing wide of those same wet walkers waddling idly between rows of symmetrically stationed cars: man's rendezvous with anonymity, courtesy of Pontiac, purchasing power and the premium of progress.

With our current thirst for oil resulting in everything from the devastation of Iraq to the precariousness of the home economy, one cannot help but continue to see ourselves in Tati's full-screen version of this obtuse oblivion.

Dan Lalande is a screenwriter and educator living in Ottawa.

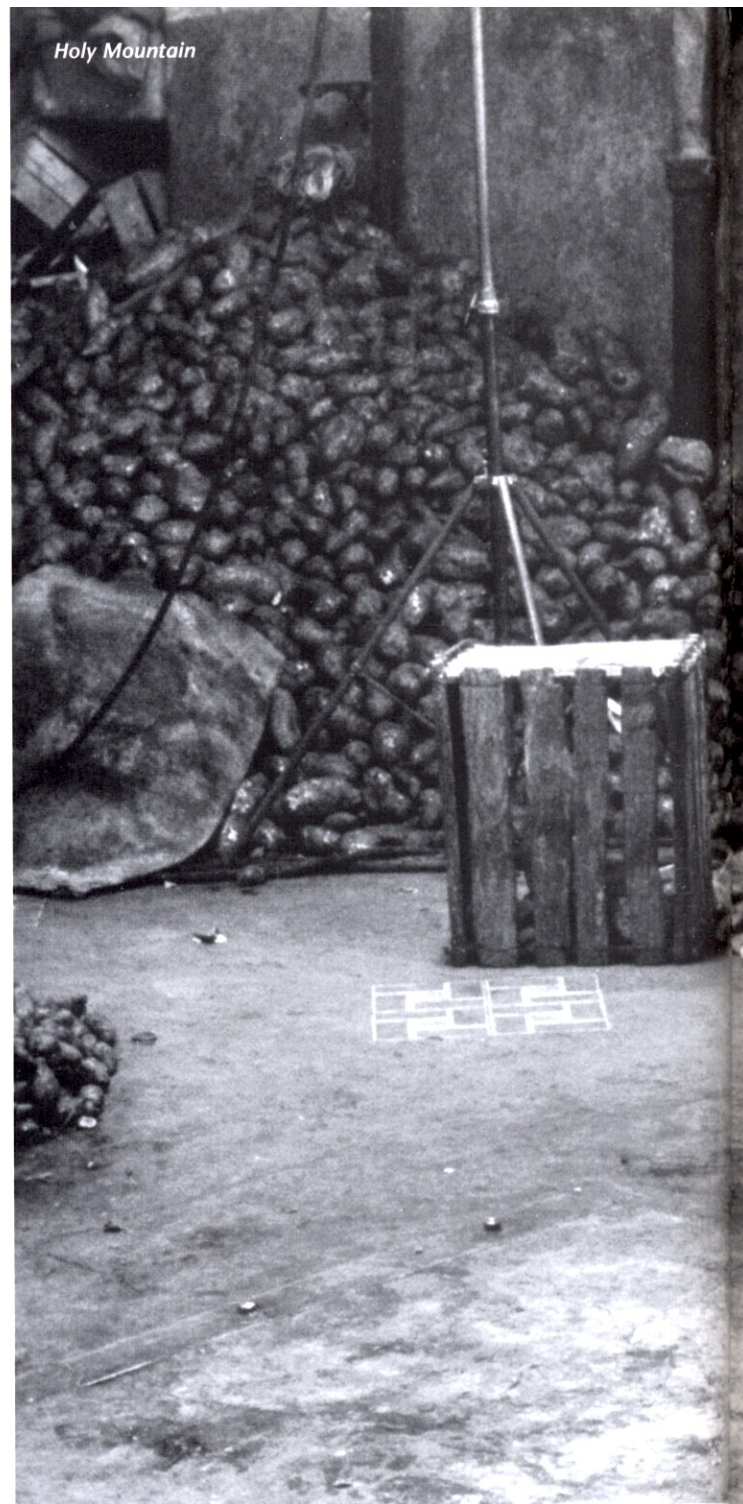
The Art of Persuasion

OR: HAVE YOU SEEN
THIS MAN'S FILMS LATELY?

DANIEL STEFIK

It appears that the discipline of cinema studies is entering an unprecedented stage, following a brief, misguided excursion into the realm of what has been dubbed the 'post-theory' era in cinema studies. A fairly recent survey of this precarious field—doubly unsettling in terms of both the state of film criticism and the state of the medium itself—entitled *Reinventing Film Studies* provides a case in point. In it, the editors have assembled a range of texts that explore issues pertaining to a number of aesthetic, historical, and more generally, theoretical issues surrounding the past, present, and future (i.e. multimedia and digital formats) of film theory and criticism. Bill Nichols' key text, an articulation of this less-than-desirable state, accordingly titled *Film Theory and the revolt against the master narratives*, constructs a compelling argument calling for a return to a climate wherein the art of theorizing projects as "a representation of how we wish to engage with the world."¹ This change in attitude reflects the underlying assumptions about the status and role of intellectuals and points to an earlier incarnation of a similar debate in the late sixties writings of Noam Chomsky.² Chomsky's appeal was aimed at addressing and confronting American imperialism and more specifically the stale intellectual and critical climate during America's widely contested interventions in Southeast Asia. In *American Power*, he argued for the need to question the numerous levels of consent—at the level of both government and media—powers that conspired to control the flow and order of information. Equally collaborative in this war of words and images were "academic apologists", essentially intellectuals who were unwilling to commit to their intellectual duties, duties that could potentially place their academic titles in jeopardy.³ Echoes of Nichols' timely appeal can be observed in a recent issue of *CineAction* wherein Richard Rushton provides a suitable critique of the relatively new yet essentially limited paradigm that is audience research. Rushton vies to return (at least a portion of) film studies to proper film interpretation with the ultimate goal of offering "ways in which the world *might* be changed"; we should not strain to identify a trend here, one that projects an awareness and perception of film studies as primarily a humanity, where scientifically inspired methodologies hold less ground.

This motion towards even the realm of possibility was enough to inspire an act of critical resuscitation on my part, and



in the following pages I will state my case for a renewed interest in a most underrated and neglected work of art, Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Holy Mountain* (1973). Furthermore, this is but one specimen culled from a much larger group of films such as Benoit Delepine and Gustave de Kervern's *Avida* (2006) that underscore our need to revise the current state of film criticism, or risk banishing potentially great artworks to the dustbins of film history.

The history surrounding the release of Jodorowsky's third feature is a curious one, and even a meagre knowledge of it strikes one as being strangely conspiratorial. A most ambitious production, it was funded graciously by none other than John Lennon



and Yoko Ono via their producer Allen Klein, to the tune of one and a half million dollars, and was the most expensive Mexican film produced to date. Following Jodorowsky's abandonment of Pauline Réage's 1954 sado-erotic bestseller *The Story of O*, Klein chose to shelve the former's films until very recently. Nevertheless, *Holy Mountain* has often been credited as the film that ushered in the midnight (cult) screenings that evolved in cine-clubs across the globe, thanks in part to the success of Jodorowsky's earlier metaphysical western, *El Topo* (1969). A few years ago, during a stint at a local repertory cinema, I could fondly recall having to turn film enthusiasts away from the box office because our Friday and Saturday evening screenings were

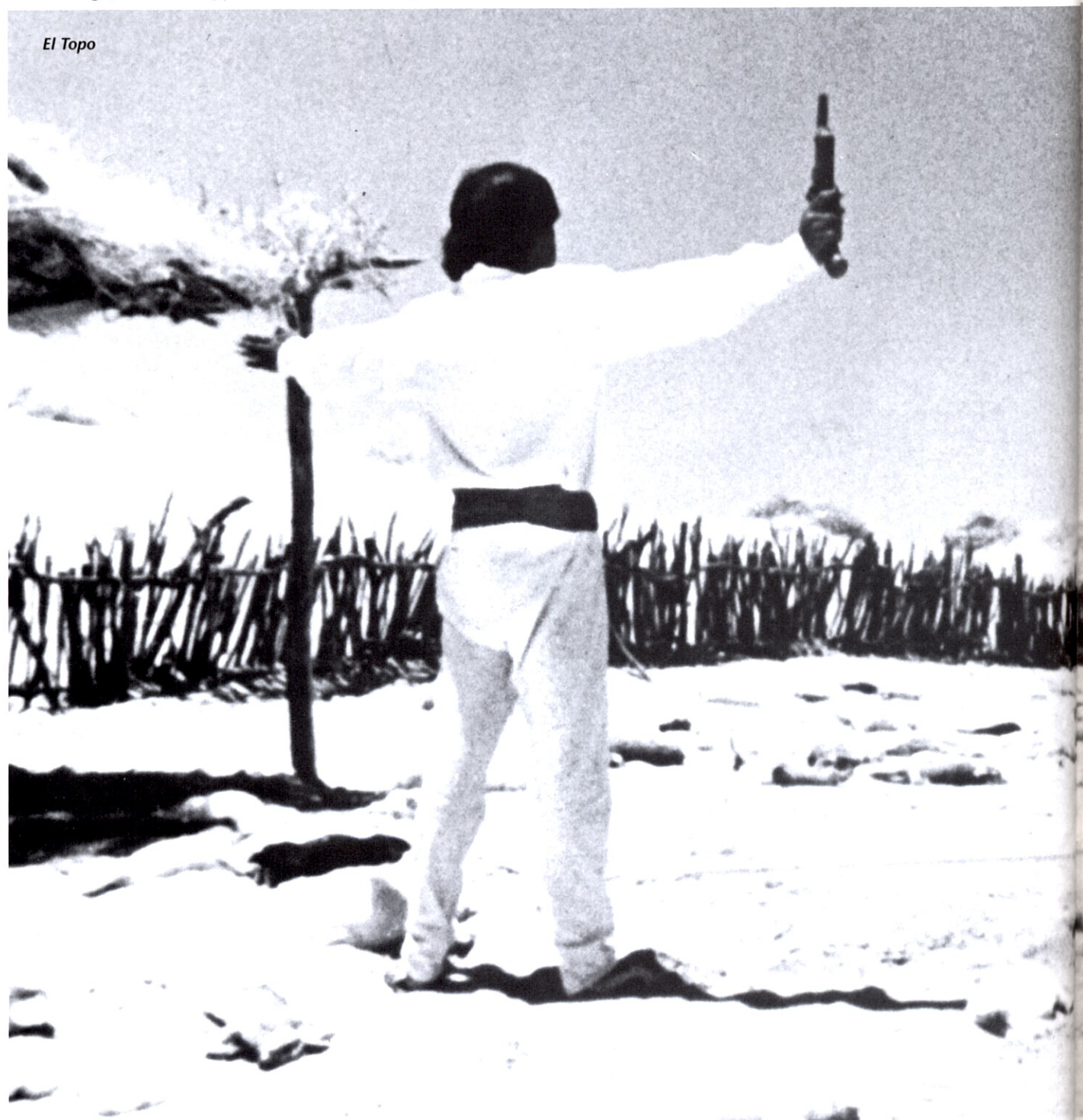
sold out. Even then, and most regrettably, the film has been grossly underrated, barely receiving a single mention in any major film history text, aside from Thompson and Bordwell's *Film History: An Introduction*, which trivially likens two of his features to "having traces of the Surrealist impulse."⁵ How could a film with such a reputation be omitted from the canons of film history? Could there have been a deliberate attempt on the part of film historians to sideline the film, along with the majority of Jodorowsky's rather impressive output? Or is this a classic case of the film's release coinciding rather unfortunately with the decline of the Marxist paradigm in cinema studies, given the increasing pressure and institutionalization of cinema studies in

academic circles since the late sixties? These types of questions beg a closer look at the film, particularly in light of the arguments and general call to arms that Nichols and others have recently put forth.

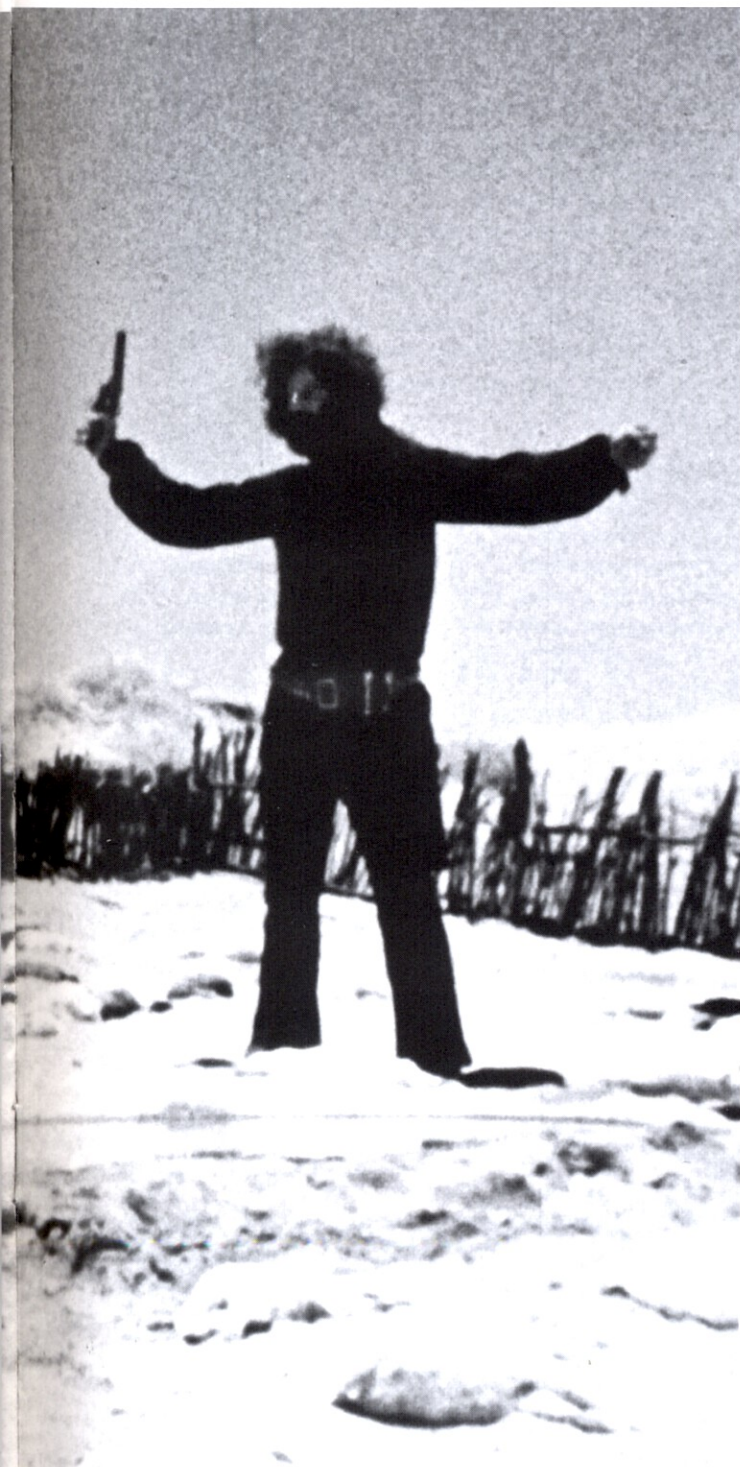
In an academic discipline where film texts are far too often plugged into formulas to evidence how well a work conforms to a methodology—or better yet, to prove how well a conceptual framework stands on its own—there will be very little room to acknowledge, let alone appreciate a film like *Holy Mountain*.

That is not to say that the film doesn't lend itself to a myriad of conceptual frameworks or avenues of exploration of its content; however, here the operative word is *lend*, and not *offer*. Besides, at a second glance psychoanalysts could have a field day with the diversity of complex relationships and unconscious motivations which unite the film's pantheon of (rather absurdist) characters. Formalists and semioticians might find the film puzzling, but no shortage of signs and referents are presented from which to draw conclusions as to how the film functions, either in con-

El Topo



junction with other films of the period or as a work of significance; champions of post-colonialism would find much to appreciate given that the film was shot in Mexico by a Chilean filmmaker (born of Jewish Russian immigrants) and explores, in an albeit episodic fashion, the effects of colonialism on the Third World; and who could leave out the Marxists? They knew they were sitting on a goldmine, confronted with a film that could serve as a rallying point for the left in terms of its exhibition and reception (and distribution) history and as a work which



explored (re)-presentations of those functions in society at large. In fact, I would argue that Jodorowsky's project often reads (in part) like a faithful adaptation of Karl Marx's *Das Capital* (1867), a feat that certainly would have inspired Eisenstein's own (purported) desire to do the same a few decades earlier. Yet, the approach that should bear the most fruit, at least to anyone curious enough to approximate the film's no less than intoxicating effect on audiences, would be as a phenomenology of the impressively unique film experience that *Holy Mountain* has to offer.

Having only hinted at the possibilities that *Holy Mountain* offers with respect to critical reflections, how is it that the body of criticism surrounding such a controversial and arguably important film be so scant?⁶ Unfortunately, the status quo has it that films have to be written about (and to a lesser extent—canonized) in order to find their ways into the classrooms of our educational institutions, and by the time they attain this cinematic rite of passage their potential urgency as cultural artefacts has often worn off. Though to Jodorowsky's credit (and in my humble opinion), the film's aesthetic merit and purely innovative style and content should have garnered him a special mention in the annals of film history. David Bordwell, are you listening?

The time is nigh to placate the reader with several examples from the film that will better situate the argument at hand, but not without a slight contextualization using Nichols' illuminating thoughts on the use of *rhetoric* in the arts, more specifically in cinema.

Nichols' exposition of the concept of *rhetoric* is crucial to understanding the complex inner workings of a film such as *Holy Mountain*. Spectators who are used to more traditional approaches to narrative filmmaking will certainly find the experience the film has to offer a confounding one in the least, though according to the dictum of the rhetorical form this only works to the film's advantage and is actually what makes Jodorowsky's film so successful on its own terms. Rather than proffering the concept of rhetoric as "a bag of elocutionary techniques and propagandistic protocols", Nichols instead argues for the following remarks: (rhetoric is) "embodied, impassioned, situated and purposeful." A primary criterion of the rhetorician is to produce an effect, one that is above all corporeal. For those subscribing to its charms—and I would certainly include Harmony Korine and Bruno Dumont in this camp, each being idiosyncratic filmmakers who for the most part ensure the supremacy of images over words)—rhetoric is highly sought after for its capacity to move the viewer, in terms of how he or she exists in the world. Calling attention to the conflict between philosophy and religion in matters of knowledge, Nichols anchors his argument historically:

*"Before Marx, Freud, and the phenomenon of the commodity fetish, religion challenged philosophy to the ground of truth. The paradox of the trinity is a spiritualized way of representing the idea of the Word made flesh that began, in the West, with Greek oratory and the rhetoric of embodied thought and that painting, sculpture, poetry and music carried forward. It continues with cinema and visual culture."*⁷

Jodorowsky places us at this crucial juncture from the opening of his film. During the credit sequence we are introduced to a figure cloaked in black (played by Jodorowsky himself), with two women sitting across from him. The figures are framed symmetrically within an entirely wallpapered room, which according to its pattern and layout has the effect of manipulating spatial perception. This choice in setting appears motivated by a desire to place the sequence out of the bounds of time, and stands in sharp contrast to a more conventional churchgoing experience; it also allows for increasing emphasis on the gestures themselves that will make up the scene. The sequence involves a series of highly ritualized gestures, the priest-like figure preparing a white cloth dipped in liquid, used to cleanse the women of their made-up faces. He then proceeds in removing their artificial nails, adornments, and clothes and finally shaves their heads before turning their bare craniums under the brim of his hat. The scene seems to hint at the power structures that are hidden in religious rituals (the confessional notwithstanding), and attempts to reveal certain religious practices for the mighty and authoritative gestures that they often appear to be. In addition, the images propose a critique of power in a Foucaultian sense; "(religious) power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself."⁸ Jodorowsky's images propose an attack on the very edifice of power that seeks to control and repress human sexuality.

During the sequence, which lasts almost two and a half minutes, not a single word of dialogue is uttered. However, the images are accompanied by an ensemble of chanting voices and clattering noises, each evoking a sense of impending doom. There is certainly a rhetorical hand at work here, most apparent in the style of montage that stitches each carefully composed shot together in a rather forced manner. Some viewers might liken this approach to a form of brainwashing (though others might prefer to use the lighter, less menacing term 'didacticism'), yet I'd argue that the sequence manages to tap into our subconscious processes in a manner that is simultaneously liberating and dreadful. Dreadful because the "devious and supple mechanisms of power" are being affronted, challenged by a filmmaker concerned with the roots and origins of religious power.⁹ The sequence's beauty lies in this albeit temporary occupation (by the spectator) of an abstruse state, nestled somewhere between our logical and subconscious processes. Jodorowsky grounds his images and sounds in a rhetoric that persuasively returns us to the body, to a locus of "entangled bodies, of texts and viewers."¹⁰ This highly existential, visceral style of filmmaking has no equivalent in dialogue-driven films, nor does it find a match in films that strive for a more objective manner of representation. Jodorowsky implicates us in these ritual and sacred (re)enactments that tend to appeal to our corporeal as well as mental processes. Granted there are many of us who would much rather avoid deeper states of awareness and being, and choose to focus on states that assert our one-dimensionality (to borrow a term from Herbert Marcuse), and rightfully so. But for those searching for experiences that contest the surface of things, there is always the deeply metaphysical, always existential cinema of Alejandro Jodorowsky.

My reading of the sequence is but one possible interpreta-

tion, abetted by the film's rhetorical form that is arguably one of its most prominent features. Umberto Eco's theory of the open work is particularly useful in shedding light on this approach to filmmaking. The univocal message that is characteristic of a more standardized Catholic ritual is substituted for one that is revised, "untranslatable, lively, and persuasive."¹¹ Therefore, this model of semantic content provides the viewer with an abundance of information—"not the kind of information that enriches one's knowledge of the concepts to which it refers, but rather a kind of aesthetic information that rests on formal value, on the value of the message as an essentially reflexive act of communication." Again, this might be one of the reasons that Jodorowsky's films are prone to increase one's awareness of subconscious processes.¹²

Blaming the lack of critical response to Jodorowsky's films on the limited distribution of his filmography is an argument that might have been justified in the past (our tendency to rely on VHS and DVD formats and available distribution channels can limit our choice of films), but thanks to Jodorowsky's controversial, rewarding, and finally accessible films, we can only hope that a space will be cleared in the textbooks of film history, a much deserved space that will give this filmmaker's tall visions their due.

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Notes

- 1 Bill Nichols, "Film Theory and the Revolt Against the Master Narratives", in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed's Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 48.
- 2 Note how I've deliberately omitted the more intimidating and limiting title 'academic'; the substitution of the term intellectual allows for knowledge to extend beyond institutional barriers.
- 3 One exception in this respect is the notable and tragic example of philosopher and professor Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse was chastised and alienated by his fellow senior faculty and administrators at the University of California for speaking out against American intervention in Vietnam.
- 4 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw Hill, 1994), 651.
- 5 The body of research is limited to a few articles, most of which promote the release of the DVD boxed set in 2007. Aside from a few arguably trivial inquiries from French film periodicals of the seventies, Doyle Greene's *The Mexican Cinema of Darkness* is the only known book that deals with Jodorowsky at length, and even then his focus is on *El Topo*, providing only a production and exhibition history of *Holy Mountain*.
- 6 Bill Nichols, "Film Theory and the Revolt Against the Master Narratives", in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed's Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 46.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Vol.1)*, (New York: Random House, 1978), 86.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Bill Nichols, "Film Theory and the Revolt Against the Master Narratives", in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed's Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 46.
- 10 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 94.
- 12 For those interested in pursuing this manner of cinematic address, David Lynch's films provide great results. It is perhaps useful to mention that both filmmakers espouse some forms of surrealism in the cinema (in terms of visuals or narrative construction) and both filmmakers are champions of transcendental meditation, a form of meditation that most likely affects each filmmakers' creative impulse.

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